

To Love a Monster

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To Love a Monster

by [Attic_Nights](#)

Summary

As a selkie, Commodore James Norrington belongs to a world of legendary creatures. Like all of these creatures, he must not fall in love with a mortal - to do so would be to sacrifice his heart in a literal sense, and become the monster he dreads to be. Until, one day while swimming, he spies a mysterious yet familiar shape in the water. The creature is most definitely not human, and for the first time in a long time, Norrington begins to hope.

Notes

A heartfelt thank you to [the_dala](#) for being a wonderful beta.

While this is *technically* a WIP, it is complete (thus will be not be abandoned). Updated at regular intervals.

If one wants to read more about selkies, [Wikipedia](#) has a good general overview. I shape my own lore though, so beyond the basics don't hold me to gospel. Hopefully, they're explained well enough in-text that extra research is not needed.

Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There are three types of monsters.

Those that sleep under your bed. Those that live inside your head. And those that sleep inside your bed; the one that looks back at you after you wake up. They fill up every inch of you. Until you try to shake that monster, and you find you can't.

Lose those monsters and you lose yourself.

There was an enchanted lake in my childhood home. The lake lay not in the house, of course, but on the far-reaching grounds, and it was far older than even the great oaks that gave it shade. And, for as long as I can remember, I have been drawn to it. Grandmother's in there, you know. Floating serenely in the still waters.

Captive.

My father – my *real* father, not the one in stiff clothes with his title on a deed without having done a deed in his life – did crawl out of this lake one crisp moonless night with algae and darkness dripping from his shifting seal form. Without wanting to let go, my mother guided me, a squirming toddler, and breathed sweet words I remember not.

The lake, of course, shaped me in addition to my teachings above water. As I grew, it would caress its salty secrets across my aquatic form, under my father's guiding tail.

My grandmother would watch us with blank eyes no different to a common seal's except in colour. My father told me she fell in love with a mortal once. His father.

"It's fine," he would say, "to love a mortal, to give them our heart, our soul – but for one thing. Death consumes all humans. And should it greet them with our hearts in their hands, that part of us dies too. Consumed into the ether, our bodies stay. Grandmother consumed – oh, she consumed too much. A beast, a monster did she become, like the monsters humanity thinks us to be. So now she rests here for eternity where she can do no harm, trapped by magic. At least, until a human becomes wanting of a seal coat."

Tonight differed from our usual interludes. The moon hung high as we travelled through London's crying heart. We funnelled to the hems of her skirts, to places dark and dank, until we reached a hidden pub. Two gnarled yew trees leaned to gossip over an old thatched roof, and white paintwork clawed free from ancient stone. Its sign waved away patrons, cracked and faded, and no sound emitted henceforth.

The pub was *magic*.

I gripped my father's hand tight as we walked inside, and was immediately greeted by a cascade of sounds and warmth.

A pair of storm kelpies recited poetry from under the yellow glow of the hearth, a note of thunder

in their voices. Their skin was blue as the beautiful sea and tattooed with indigo; when the candles flickered, I got the impression of their wings sprawled along the floor, as corporeal as air.

By a corner, three maidens giggled and teased, youth eternal on their flushed cheeks, their talons sharp around their bottles.

I spun around, my head abuzz with the sights of creatures like me – myths, legends, monsters. How alive they all looked!

Pa hoisted me onto a rickety barstool, allowing me to see the bartender's face.

"En, my love! This here's my son, James."

"Seeley!" greeted the monster behind the bar. "And how'dya do, laddie?"

It was plain that the man was not a man but a monster, as I could not help but stare at a face I had seen before only in my imagination. He was one who I had recently read about in a book, and had entertained fantasies about ever since.

My father grinned, a knowing smile. I frowned at him. "Who'd you see? Is she handsome?"

I considered the question, an idea of the bartender's ilk forming. I had never thought of Robinson Crusoe as beautiful before, so I looked at the monster searchingly as he pulled my father a pint.

"He's all right, I think? Is he a siren?"

My father felt stiff beside me, but he washed it away with a laugh. "Aye, smart lad, *he* is a siren. Although she's a woman to me. Cursed be the day I ever meet your likeness, En."

"As if you 'ave a 'eart to lose," said En, winking as he pressed the pint into his hand. "You've a dozen women enticed and care naught about any o' them. With your brand o' luck you'll fall for a monster like us and 'scape the mortal's curse."

En referred of course to not losing one's heart.

"Enough." Pa shifted. "We're here to see the bean nighe."

"The banshee?" The bartender looked over at a muttering hag with a damp face and long hair, bent in on a pipe and goblet of rum. She scoffed, somehow noticing our exchange.

"I am rusalka," said the hag, correcting him. "Cousin." En flinched slightly.

For a moment I was stumped; rusalki were water nymphs, unable to leave their streams, and she was far from home. Then she looked at the bartender with aged eyes – and it was here I realised they had seen love and still lost it. "No," said Pa, repeating himself to En. "The bean *nighe*."

"Child," said the rusalka suddenly, forcing me to turn, her face now scant inches from mine. Her breath was bitter and soaked in liquor, and I suppressed a shudder. I looked back at Pa, but he was talking to the siren.

"Mortals! No trust them!" She leaned in closer still to whisper in my ear, and it took all my courage not to flinch away. "They be monsters." She pulled back with a sage nod, seemingly content to have spewed forth her drunken wisdom.

Pa lofted me up once more and slung me so I might cling to his hip.

“I thought water nymphs could not leave their waters?” I wondered aloud, enjoying the salty warmth of my father’s neck. He smelled like the ocean after rain, like thunderstorms and the silty bottom of the deep.

“Aye, most can’t – though I’m not sure about rusalki.” I blinked. It was the first time I had heard my father, font of knowledge, unsure. “But all can once their heart is claimed not by the wet but by a human. They must become landlocked, see. Else, they become but fell voices in the air and foam in the sea.

“En’s the same. Consumed a thousand mortal souls and some of us besides before being cursed by a child. How? No one’s really sure, laddie. Pulls pints now. Can’t even dip her toe in a bath. Humans.” He smiled sadly. “Even their children can ruin thee.”

He put me down and pointed me the way, out the rotting back doors. My stomach undulated, colour draining from my face and leaving it cold. I breathed.

Alone, I marched outside into the quiet, the pub’s enchanted walls holding its loud secrets within.

With her knees in the stream, the bean nighe washed a baby’s bonnet in the faint light that leaked from back of the pub. The washerwoman wrung the fabric with gnarled, webbed hands and smoothed out the creases by flattening it on her breast. The garment dried like this, quick and clean, and melted into the ether as it does.

“I am grateful to meet you,” I called out to her, mindful to be polite. Faeries were tricky beasts, fast to anger, and equally fast to spook.

“Sae young,” she lamented not to me, her Scottish brogue warm in the cold night air. Her teeth were uneven but magic overlaid her appearance, shimmering between dreadful and lovely. I wondered how she would appear to a human right now, blind to such transmutations.

“Could you not write a message into the clothes and warn them of their fate?” I don’t presume to dictate how fey do their work, but I was struck curious by the genuine pain that lanced through her eyes when she picked up the next garment of the doomed – a bloodstained cravat.

The air gathered around us, thick and quiet fog, and I feared to have caused her offence. Eventually she smiled, looking up at me through twig-braided hair. “Ye wad use up one o’ ye three on tha’?”

I blushed. “I have only one question of need.” She did not pause in her ministrations, working until all the blood washed clean with the stream, but she hummed.

“Ye ken the rules?”

I knew only the lore, what had been taught to me by my selkie father, but I nodded. Three questions each. No more, no less.

“Will ye be seekin’ the names of the deid?”

“Only of those living and yet to come.”

She laughed slowly. “Ye got mense, anie.” She patted the damp earth beside her, and I sat down to join her, envisioning the colour of the maid’s face when she saw my dirtied britches. The faerie was quiet for a little while, the only sounds being the gentle sluicing of the stream water against enchanted cloth.

Eventually she turned to me, answering my question. “Tis be too late, ye ken. The mortals be dyin’

whan I get thair claes,” she paused to pick up a single woollen stocking, “An’ thay be deid whan thay do get ‘em back.”

I glanced back at the pub. My original intent to ask whether I would lose my heart seemed foolish now. From all I saw, long as we live our love is inevitable, unavoidable. We love far too much to not lose it. Our curse. Unless...

“Do I give my heart to a mortal?”

“Ye heart gives itself,” the washerwoman said, not looking me in the eye. “Thay be a bird. Free in soul. Youth as eternal as ye heart.”

“That doesn’t mean anything! And you answered not as to their mortality.” My heart could die with them as they died young! Or perhaps I would fall for a beast that aged not, and keep my heart. More meanings bubbled and frothed in my mind, and I angered at the interpretable nature of her prophesy.

She shrugged. “Words min nought, an’ words min everything. Thair mortality...” she hesitated. “I cannae clearly see, as be entwined tae ye.” She produced in her hand a map fragment, which Pa would later tattoo onto my thigh.

I felt dizzy in the sudden silence, my normally cool blood running hot. I swallowed, remembering myself.

“Thank you. May your heart be true and your soul live long.” I offered the nicety flatly, but without malice. It was a common enough expression between us non-humans that we said it to even those like this bean nighe, already departed from their soul and cursed in their heart.

“Sae faw ye, aine,” said she. *May the same befall you, little one.*

I stood, but then paused, feeling the soft skin map in my palm. She looked at me, her fingers now caressing a pair of tiny shoes.

I asked my final question. “What is your name?”

It struck her frozen. Her jaw agape, her fair eyes wide. “Maisie,” whispered the faerie, and she faded into the ether.

Chapter End Notes

[Translations from The Online Scots Dictionary](#) (hover over text for translations).

Maisie is a traditional Scottish name, meaning pearl.

Bean nighe “is a Scottish fairy; an omen of death and a messenger from the Otherworld [...] As the ‘Washer at the Ford’ she wanders near deserted streams where she washes the blood from the grave-clothes of those who are about to die. It is said that mnathan nighe (the plural of bean nighe) are the spirits of women who died giving birth and are doomed to do this work until the day their lives would have normally ended.” (from [Wikipedia](#))

Storm kelpies, more commonly known as the blue men of the Minch, “inhabit the

stretch of water between the northern Outer Hebrides and mainland Scotland, looking for sailors to drown and stricken boats to sink. [...] They have the power to create storms, but when the weather is fine they float sleeping on or just below the surface of the water. [...] They are without counterparts in the rest of the world.” (from [Wikipedia](#))

Rusalki are Slavic water nymphs. “While generally, the rusalka could not completely stand out of water, some fiction works tell that rusalki could climb trees, and sit there singing songs, or sit on a dock with her feet in the water and comb her hair, or join other rusalki in circle dances in the field. [...] They were originally linked with fertility; they came out of the water in the spring to transfer life-giving moisture to the fields and thus helped nurture the crop.” (from [Wikipedia](#))

The Calm Before the Storm

Chapter by [not my shell \(Attic Nights\)](#)

Chapter Summary

Aboard the *Dauntless*, Norrington chases after Sparrow - who lets himself be pursued. They write each other letters and it's so very sweet.

Pity.

Chapter Notes

One day I'll be able to write seamen and not snigger. Hopefully that day will be a long time coming (ha).

Thanks again to Dala for her beta work, and her unexpected approval of my dreadful humour. All remaining errors are my own.

I have experimented a little with the letters. If you are having difficulties reading, if you hover over the picture, text should pop up. I don't know if it works on the mobile version, but if not, the text is also in the image description (although, once again, I don't know if that is accessible on mobile either). Additionally, if you are experiencing any problems at all, or would prefer plain text, please let me know.

Edit: 4 years later and the pictures' links finally died. RIP. As a stopgap I've plain-texted it. I would have to dig hard to find the original letters on an old old hdd. The words are the same, that I can guarantee, thanks to the witchery I described above. For those who missed the letters, they were in ye olde parchment, which was water spotted and semi-translucent... And I gave Norrington Jane Austen's handwriting for the lulz. Jack drew doodles on his because :)

'Keep your heart to yourself and your head below water.'

Of this my father's advice, I managed to follow half at best. On the other hand, his other adage, *'Stay away from humans'*, I made no attempts to heed.

Perhaps I should have.

I first spied the shape in the shadows two moons ago. It eddied up from the ocean floor like ink, its hair, wings, tendrils, tentacles... *something*, beckoning me forwards. At the time I watched transfixed at its form, which seemed almost familiar to me, before I darted away to rejoin my ship.

I am not the first to make a mistake, and I doubt so long as my species perseveres, I should not be the last. We are all told the same stories, shown the same examples. We all differ in our choices, though, and that remains our curse. Humanity considers us cursed. They consider not the irony. It

is hard when they, the most beautiful things, can be so terrible and curse us in return.

For now I avoided thoughts of mistakes, and caressed the Scottish faerie's map fragment that was tattooed to my inner thigh. With a nod, I bade Lieutenant Groves a good night, amused at the man's familiarity as he wished me the same. His friendship may have come as a surprise, but it was not unwelcome. As it was, Groves gave me a wink as I headed out under the guise of retiring to my cabin.

"Get some rest, James. Heaven knows few poor souls are going to sleep much tomorrow."

He referred of course to our intentions to dock. Taverns, fresh food, supplies and, of course, whores. I shook my head reproachfully. "Much needs to be done to grant the *Dauntless* the care she requires. Care which is not, Theodore, found in Bermuda's dens of inequity." I allowed a small smile, and he hid his grin with a bow as I left him.

Once in my cabin I stripped off my coat and wig, peeling off the heavy layers with relish. My smallsword I placed by my bunk, hidden and within reach of a slumbered hand. Fashioned by Will Turner, the fine sword was perhaps my second most prized possession, a reminder of love and friendship. His dear wife Elizabeth was once to be my betrothed, but I could never love her in the way she deserved. I now think of her as a friend and love her like a sister. It was not kind, not when we were courting, but I have always been a little selfish. I paused, smoothing the creases from my coat as I hung it up. That which was most precious to me, however, lay camouflaged amidst my wardrobe. I grasped the seal pelt eagerly, the fur soft in my hand as I pried the middle cabin window open and slipped through.

The ocean was icy to my human form as I plunged unseen from the stern, causing my fingers to shake and my heart to race as I wrapped myself in my pelt below the surface. My body pushed and pulled, my skin tightening and stretching, warping and reshaping my bones. The transformation complete, I bobbed in the water for a few moments, recovering my senses and breathing through the lingering jolts of pain. Transformation was difficult with clothes, even with ones as unobtrusive as my undergarments.

My eyes opened clear and fresh, and I darted eagerly around the *Dauntless*' hull, a sense of liberty coursing through me as I raced my ship through the water. Together, we cut through the water swiftly, the fire of freedom hot in my veins. As it had been nearly two moons since my last swim, I felt the need to do everything, anything, so I twisted my back flippers through the water and looped myself in tight, joyous coils.

It was then that I saw it again. A shape so far away it was nearly obscured by the dark ocean. A small school of fish darted around the shrouded being, their fins black in the night. Cautiously I waved my tail-end, treading water. The creature was still, then mirrored my action. I swam towards it, and it darted back, but not before I caught the impression of dreadlocks and a lithe form. I stilled, struck again by the sensation of familiarity. Fancy warred with reason, and I needed clarity like air.

But as my head broke surface I became aware of shouts and arguing voices. The elation I felt before dropped to stone, fearing the worst. Had someone seen me transform? I swam along the starboard, propelling myself alongside my ship as she cut through the waves.

"...And I be tellin' yer someone went overboard!"

His friend's voice was garbled to my ears, smothered by choppy water. The first man's voice cut through the night once more.

"I 'eard 'is splash, dint I!"

“Ya rum boddle, more like!”

“What’s the meaning of this?”

I could practically hear the seamen stand to attention as Groves marched to them, his boots clanking on the deck. Two drunken ordinary seamen I could slip past, but my Lieutenant I could not. Curse Groves’ sobriety. I’d granted extra rum rations for this night, just so this outing might go unnoticed. Impatient with the knowledge that Groves could very well seek to find his Commodore in case of a man overboard, I ducked under the surface. I peered into the ocean’s warm embrace, but the creature from before appeared not. Unsure whether that boded good or ill, I resurfaced portside to consider my options.

I spied the lower gun deck; one porthole remained ajar. I sliced silently through the water towards the stern, hoisting myself on the keel, and held on tenuously with my flippers. The wind buffeted me, the salt water spattering my coat, but it was enough to dry me by degrees. From above, more voices called out, orders barked, and lanterns lit. I hunched away from the lantern light as the ship slowed, bitterly reminded of the risks of transforming out at sea. The original hope had been to transform in Bermuda, and crawl ashore in the morning, but what I had said to Groves remained true – I was indeed buried under work, and the *Black Pearl* slipped further out of sight with every wasted day. Though I had at first enjoyed the game Jack Sparrow played, black sails like butterflies fluttering in and out of the horizon, the pirate’s taunting was beginning to hew at my reputation.

I thought again of the mysterious beast in the water, before dismissing it. Perhaps tomorrow morning, just before the sun rose, I could chance a small swim – perhaps not enough to sate, but to tide the want before the chase resumed.

Once dry enough to transform comfortably, I harried around to my opening, which I slipped through just as a lantern swung my way. I held my breath, but no call or sound was uttered.

Sleep eluded me that night, my mind worrying over the shape in the water. The more I thought on it, the more I was convinced of my insanity. The plausibility of the beast being my pursued Jack Sparrow bobbed up and down, dark shadows entwining to become hair and a lazy smile.

I rose before dawn, my mind set on a course of action. Evidence was what I required. With that in mind, I unlatched the middle window; cold morning air blasted through for a moment until the pressure equalised. I pursed my lips and whistled a song.

The soft magic floated out onto the winds, but it was not a bird I caught.

A soft knock was all the warning I had before my door swung open, Groves falling through with the motion of the ship. He looked at me, startled.

“Sir! Commodore Norrington. I am so sorry – the door opened, I didn’t mean...” He trailed off, his red face stark against his blue coat. I looked down at my state of undress, and ran a hand through my loose natural hair. My face was unpowdered, and doubtlessly shone unwashed in the weak morning light.

His eyes shifted quickly to my barometer. The crew thought it the reason for my uncanny intuition regarding weather. Reality was I could simply read the weather as if she were words on a page.

“Not to worry, Groves.” I offered him a polite smile. “Is everything all right?”

Groves cleared his throat. “I thought I heard... something. Sir.”

“Just whistling a tune,” I said. “How goes our course?”

“On target. The winds are swift. We should reach Bermuda by noon.”

I nodded, every inch a Commodore, even if I was not dressed as such. I went to ask whether Groves had completed his communications to Lord Wills in Bristol, when a flurry of feathers shot through my open window. Just a little mistimed. I knelt to bundle the small bird from the rug.

“Ah!” I cried. “We appear to have a stowaway. I’ll deal with this, Groves.”

Groves tore his eyes from the tiny thing and nodded. He turned to leave.

“And Groves?” He paused. “I understand there was some excitement last night. Get a couple of hours sleep. I’d rather cover your duties than have my officer keel over as we make port.”

Groves nodded, lips curving into a small smile.

At the sound of the door clicking shut I collapsed into my desk chair. The bird I let hop by my ink blotter. I mused at its small size. A sparrow. How improbable.

I took the sparrow and plucked from its breast a feather. This I bound with enchanted leather cord and looped around my neck, hidden under my uniform. I poured a little rum on its feet, hoping not to get the poor creature drunk, but to bind it to something of similar scent. At least temporarily, I hoped it would chase the *Black Pearl*, and if not deliver its message to her captain, then at least to one of its drunken crew who could pass it on.

To: Mr. Jack Sparrow

Take from the sparrow a feather and keep it on thine person so it might find thee again

I looked over the letters, hoping them legible. The words themselves suddenly appeared grievous to me, as if my writing transmuted their accuracy. The use of thine and thee seemed so olden, but I relayed the words as an echo of my father’s. To modernise would be to bastardise the magic. Language was a fool’s game, and for now I could only hope that Sparrow was literate.

Below it, I wrote,

I should like to see you again, Sparrow

– Cdre. J. N.

I stood on the docks of Bermuda when the original message cannoned back, a Captain inserted into my sentence. On the back, in penmanship sprawling and ostentatious, was his reply.

"My dearest Norington,

Aye, but wat should you do wen you do?

– Captain Sparrow PS. Pretty trick, this bird."

The sparrow nibbled some of my bread as I adjourned for tea by the local Governor’s open window. The sun beat down on the many contracts I had yet to peruse, and I smiled. If the ever-present servants noticed me take the bird from my pockets, they mentioned it not.

"I confess I am entirely uncertain - there would be little left, except perchance Admiralty. I wish not to be disappointed, however.

– J. N."

The laconic reply came as we disembarked from Bermuda, my *Dauntless* cantering across the blue.

"Flatterer"

On the back I wrote,

"No, my name is James."

I almost expected him not to reply, but our sparrow tumbled onto the helm on the next calm afternoon. It stayed there on the wheel, basking happily in the sun. I sent an officer down to the kitchen for some biscuits; as I tapped them, the sparrow consumed the grubs that fell to deck. The reply I read secreted in my cabin.

"Tho a thoroughly dubious sense of humor, I revel at its revelation. Are you shore you be our esteem'd Comodore Norrington?"

My fingers drummed against the mahogany desk; it was a good desk, strong and full of secrets.

"My giving you a head start has placed my rank in a tenuous position.

– Commodore Norrington."

I waited two days for a reply, my heart soaring as our sparrow glided into view.

"My condolences, Jamie. Ever thought yourself a pirate? Here you be haring after a treasure that naught belongs to you. You seek that on which you have nary a claim.

– Jack."

His words cut my pride. I transformed that night, swimming circles around Jack's submerged form – and it was indeed Jack. His hair curled out like tentacles in the sea, his kohl-rimmed eyes coy but clear. Patches of exposed skin teased, his clothes moving without gravity. He tried to reach me with a curious hand, but I avoided it with a sharp flick of my hind flippers.

"Jack, I could hardly compare you and your ship to treasure, like that of the Isla de Muerte.

– James."

"Not all treasure is gold and silver, mate. – Jack."

Indeed, it is not.

The weeks passed while we sailed towards the Spanish coast. Jack still stayed out of reach on that horizon, but my words could touch him, and I considered that enough.

I never spoke about our moonlight swims, for fear of interception of our messages, and Jack did the same. I could scarcely believe it, but Jack seemed to like me quite a lot, asking often about my appearance, my happiness, and my hopes.

I thought of love. Could I love a pirate? A pirate not human, but a monster like me. I shuddered to

imagine him human; to bleed not ink into parchment but flesh into soil.

As much as I pursued Jack above water, Jack seemed to pursue me below. I let him not catch me.

Turnabout was fair play, after all.

Down to a Sunless Sea

Chapter by [not my shell \(Attic Nights\)](#)

Chapter Notes

Once again, hover with mouse over letters for text. Chapter title from Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*.

I laid in my bed one night with thoughts of Jack swimming in my head. I smiled, relief swallowing me. My love was a monster like me. Such luck was mine that Jack should be as eternal as the sea herself, and twice as fair.

Twice as deadly, too.

I wondered what his ilk might be, but dismissed the thought as unimportant.

How had I known him without knowing him to be the one? Guilt shot through me as I remembered my attempts to hang him. For as much power as it dangled above me, duty had kept me on a tight leash.

I recalled his dainty wrists from our first meeting on Port Royal's docks, the deadly way the fine bones undulated under golden skin when I held them. I thought of those same deadly wrists guiding wicked fingers under my breeches.

I imagined my hands as his, teasing the hardness gathered at my groin. His depraved, dark eyes twinkling stars in the moonlight, a slick tongue rough with brine and thunder. He would smell pure like the ocean he so loved, until the point when he loved me more than she and so smelled like me instead.

I would swallow his manhood and cause him to cry out in a voice like honey. I would taste, suck and consume until he was mine, and marked me in return.

I liked to think he would part his thighs on my sheets, bonelessly flexible from climax, and let me slip between them. My hand moved faster, making soft sounds I could believe as being wrought from Jack's supple flesh.

My beautiful monster, I thought, coming with his name on my lips.

Jack.

As we sailed by Spain and through the Mediterranean, I grew aware of my obligation to pay tribute to the power in the waters. The mermaid coven that resided off Sardinia was small but influential. Should we pass through the Greek islands, I expected to meet with the main coven.

I stole away late in the night when the ship had slowed and the winds were calm. I sped northeast through darkened waters with a small oilskin secured around my neck, leaving my ship and crew behind.

Merfolk are not hard to find, even in the darkest of nights. Pure notes of song do travel through the depths, ocean life rendered impotent by its magic. Once I reached my waypoint I began to hear their music, softly at first, and then all at once; all but consuming me. By some waving weeds, a large docile shark stared at me with blank eyes, a small school of fish calmly flanking it. I could not stifle my natural instinct to avoid the creature, as without the mers' song it would surely pursue me.

A sudden hand caressed my back and I darted away for a moment, spooked. My heart racing, I swam back, frustration that would normally stain my cheeks red instead flashing in my green eyes. A mermaid flicked her tail at me, her sharp copper teeth splitting her face into a smile. Dark, warm hued skin contrasted with her inky, silvered kin in the Caribbean, and served to remind me that this territory was not my own.

"This way, green eyes," drawled the mermaid.

I allowed her outstretched hand to guide me to her coven, trusting.

The coven resided among a colourful reef and mossy rocks, and a dozen fish laid suspended by song, like silver leaves on a coral tree. The matriarch seemed enchanted by me, spiralling around me, her characteristic stout form smaller than even my seal one. We spoke the language of the deep; while it had various dialects, unlike land it had no borders.

"I call myself a selkie."

"Very good," said she. "You come alone?"

"The only one of my kind that I bring is me," I assured, wishing not to invoke a territorial spat.

"Hmm... You're a virgin, aren't you?" she assumed. "Much better than those sluttish boys we have here. No respect. Wanton. You *are* a good boy, are you not? Tall..." She said the last as if it were a minor drawback.

"I do my best, Madame," I said, wary of the submissive, svelte males that flexed their claws. "I bring a gift." I gestured to my oilskin with a flick of my neck. "A lock of hair from a child yet to find love."

A wicked smile clawed up her proud face. "You find what you love, and you let it kill you." I forced a smile at her joke. Her coven giggled, unbidden. "Do you bring news from any of my sisters?"

"Yes. The Jamaican coven."

"How do they fare?"

I chose my words in a manner to exclude any culpability from their meaning. I had no designs on sparking a war. "They ask likewise of you," I said with a diplomatic dip of my head. I continued to outline their lives, skimming over any ideological freight as swiftly as a flat stone in a pond.

The matriarch took my words with good grace, but it was clear her interest lay in other things.

"I should like to see you again, selkie."

"James, please. And as humbled as I am by your request, I am afraid I must deny it, as my course east demands a rigorous pace. I must return to my ship."

She swam closer than comfort, her swaying breast glittering with mother of pearl. I swallowed past my true aversion to the situation. She spoke lowly, "I can't imagine how, what with that nasty hurricane due to barrel through. It's up there now, and will rise with the day."

"Are you certain?" I asked, shocked. Mermaids were powerfully wise of all events, but I wondered if her personal attraction to me caused her to twist the truth.

To my dismay, she darted away, her expression dark. "You dare question me, whore! I," she spat, "am the Queen of the Tyrrhenian. Lies are forbidden to pass my lips, and my sources are forbidden to lie."

"I humbly apologise, fair Queen. I am unused to Mother Nature catching me so unaware. I am indebted to your information, as it is most valuable. Forgive me, please."

Mollified, she continued our formalities, but with more distance.

I excused myself at the earliest possible moment; while it was vital not to offend them, I felt every moment passed heavy and ill omened. Catching up the *Dauntless* also took far too long – at one stage I felt elation to see a hull loom out of the moonless depths, only for it to reveal itself an old caravel.

Hours later saw me crawl into my room, gasping for breath, with my pelt half-shed. Bones cracked and rearranged as I dragged myself to my stationary; once there, I desperately scrawled a note.

"Jack, Hurricane ahead. Be wise and avoid it. Please - James"

I cast about for our little sparrow, and felt relief to alight on its fluffed-up form by the fireplace. It had burrowed into its nest of rags, illuminated by the soft embers in the hearth.

"Oh little one," I apologised, gathering it up with shaking hands. "But this is of some import. Please, I implore of you haste."

The tiny bird opened its eyes blearily and reproachfully. Deciding to decline wakefulness, it burrowed under my thumb and succumbed to Morpheus' arms once more. I scratched behind its neck in the manner I knew it loved until its beady eyes opened again, feathers ruffling and smoothing.

I cast it out the window, its small wings beating a tattoo in the night.

"Pray thee be well," I breathed into the moonless night. "Please."

Despite my exhaustion I could not, *should not* sleep, and at various times cajoled three more birds – gulls, which were slower but sturdier – to speed into that dark night.

"Sparrow. Do not go through the hurricane. - James"

"My dear free spirit, I can hardly bring you back to my superiors if you're dead. - your Jamie"

"Jack, please."

Dawn clawed weakly up onto our tired faces as I argued low with my officers, needing their advice but still refusing to heed it.

“You’ve never been wrong, sir. So listen as we have done – if there is a storm such as you say, surely we should avoid it.”

I rose to gaze out the cabin window, the *Black Pearl*’s sails racing afar through winds that now battered our sides. They struck our sails hard, pulling us fast towards Jack.

“We can dock at Sfax,” offered Snook, our pilot. He did not like me much, for reasons I could never grasp. This time, he spoke to Groves, seeming to ignore me entirely. “Chances are that storm’ll be heading for Tripoli.”

“As will Mister Sparrow, I don’t doubt,” I muttered.

I turned to see Groves and Mirren exchange a look. “Sparrow loves this game,” said Groves. “I bet a month’s wages that if he makes it through he’ll wait for us before dashing off again.”

If.

And that was the problem. Icy doubt gripped my heart. My hands trembled as I gripped the back of my chair. He was a strong sailor; perhaps the best on that side of the law, but if the matriarch was true, then none could survive this.

“That wind’s pushing us on rather swiftly, is it not?”

Mirren nodded, professional as always. “Unnaturally so, sir.”

“We’ll go on,” I decided. “We have until midday. See if we can’t head him off around Sfax before he ruins us all.”

Midday came and ruined us. A black sky laughed, howling wicked to the churning waves as the *Dauntless* screamed aloud in a way I could not.

Three longboats carried off my men as I bundled in a fourth, my eyes stinging and my face impassive, when at the last moment I remembered my pelt. I halted our descent, and clambered back on board, using the railing to hoist myself onto deck.

“Sir!” cried Groves.

“Go now! That’s an order,” I shouted into the wind. A moment’s pause, and then the boat dropped once more.

I heard a shout, and saw Groves scramble over the rail. “Foolish mortals!” I cursed, and raced below to retrieve my fur. There was still time to save us both. I tore off my wig and coat as I went, but most of the clothes would have to remain in order for me to walk ashore with dignity.

My pelt retrieved, I found Groves clutching the stairway, his wig blown off and body shaking.

I stumbled forward. “Theodore!”

He turned to me as the mainmast yawned. An almighty crack echoed and the structure bowed, splintering at the sides. The deck uprooted, snapping from below. I grabbed Groves’ hand as the deck widened – an open mouth to swallow the sea and all the stragglers besides. Groves stumbled after me, and we ran together uphill to the hull. I pushed off his heavy coat so he might better float.

In the distance, one of the longboats capsized as it hit a wave, and all I could make out was scrambling hands fading into jetsam.

“Trust me!” I shouted, but the words died on the wind. Groves shook his head, uncomprehending. I tried again, my lips next to his ear. This time, he nodded. I took him by the waist and threw us into the waves, using my body to break his fall. It hurt, the breath punched cruelly from my lungs, but what would have killed a human did not me.

Groves gasped, his eyes wide and limbs flailing in panic. I implored him to relax, so he might float, but he either heard me not, or could not obey. Quickly I dove below, wrapping my pelt around me. I used my limbs for as long as possible to hold my friend aloft while I shifted, then surfaced as soon as I was transformed. I inclined my head, attempting to place it under his hand, hoping he would get the drift. Instead he floundered away. Troubled, I tried again, positioning my body so he could cling onto my aquatic form. He stared at me and pushed away, kicking furiously.

It's me! I said, or tried to, as what came out was closer to a bark. Debris flew beside us, and I ducked.

“Monster!” spluttered Groves, and my heart sank. I widened my eyes and hummed through the gale, weaving the preternatural notes into magic I had avoided all my life. As expected, Groves' body relaxed and settled into something more pliant. Euphoric. Only fully functional in seal form, the spell enthralled humans, but it came at a dark price. Withdrawal struck weak souls, leaving them feverish but able to recover, while strong ones hunted after the song ruthlessly. When found, it was the song that drove these humans to covet their pelts, to lock them in human form, to rape and abuse.

For his sake, I hoped Groves was weak.

I continued humming as I swam towards him once more, hating the magic, the power imbalance it foretold. He did float like a starfish, his eyes becoming cow-like amidst the turbulent sea, and they were the last thing I saw before an airborne shard of wood drove through his neck. He sunk, a popped balloon, and never surfaced again.

I washed onto the shore with my lungs heaving and body trembling from the punishing pace with which I propelled myself from the wreckage. On the horizon, my *Dauntless'* carcass splintered and sank gradually, as if taking each gasp of precious air before being consumed by the sea. I dried and rose as she fell into her watery grave. Tears pricked my eyes and I scrubbed at them furiously. I clutched at my pelt, digging my nails in and relishing the corresponding sting on my skin. I faced the maelstrom and let loose a scream.

In answer, a bird squawked, the wind whistled, and the waves licked the storm-muddied sand.

Silence.

I fell onto my knees and stared at the horizon.

Time barely passed when a silhouette did wade in from a suddenly calm ocean. I rose. Jack beckoned to me, ocean to his knees, his hand outstretched and his beautiful face etched in worry. I swallowed and turned from him, striding further ashore.

As I wandered through the sands, I occasionally looked back to the sea. He would be there, watching me, following me from the shallows, not coming ashore. Not dragging his feet on the dirt

nor daring to do anything of use. At times, I longed to go to him, hoping he would beg my forgiveness, but each time I turned away. I looked desperately about for the other longboats but to no avail. I told myself it is likely that they berthed in Malta or even Sfax. Though I was sure this was Libya, I know not my proximity to Tripoli.

Rain would sometimes batter me, or a coarse wind would buffet me, chilling me to the bone.

It was with this wind did I walk now. It pushed my chest and whipped sand against my face, and held my hand onwards. Blisters did burst on my feet, my discomfort a ready balm to my soul. Then for a moment, a shadow cast and a tiny ball of fluff tumbled before me onto the sands. My sparrow looked at me with dark eyes shining. It bore no message, and shied away from my touch. Drops of salty water fell onto it as I scooped it up; my voice wobbled as I whispered a spell to sever its tie to me.

I set it free, and it flew away.

My salt-licked hair fell limp from my face, wetting it, so I ripped a strip from my tattered shirt, and tugged the wayward strands back in a stout ponytail.

On the second morning, I stepped onto the tar-like sea and wrapped myself in my pelt. I stood there, waiting for Jack to appear, but he did not. I rolled my shoulders and dove. I sluiced through the brackish water at a steady pace; after a few minutes I spied him.

Sparrow raced to keep up, but his human-like form proved no match for a selkie. Though I remained unsure about what he was, he held his breath better than a dolphin, and I spared a thought to the impotency of the hangman's noose on such a creature. His voice called to me, carrying supernaturally clear through the depths.

"Please, please, my love," he pleaded, with the right amount of melancholy in his smooth timbre. I sped up, losing him with ease, though my lungs burned from exertion.

I surfaced in Tripoli to stare at a ship with black sails.

I found myself the dirtiest, bawdiest pub in the city, so rotten that not even its door survived. I stalked through past the maw of decaying teeth and painted smiles, its heavy smells and sticky floors, and looked upon my monster and despaired.

He blinked owlshly at me, the bottle in his hand frozen at half-mast. "Where's your posse?"

Jack smelled not how I imagined, not plainly like the ocean deep, or even like a pure thunderstorm. No, he smelled like rum, salt, stale bread and tart apples. I found I preferred that more.

I looked down at his pretty face, and I punched it.

No sooner had I done so did a handful of swords draw to point at me, their metal sleek in the firelight. They stood loyal between their captain and the monster. I thought about driving myself into them.

Jack righted himself, rubbing his jaw. "What happened to you, then?" His eyes widened. "The hurricane?"

"Christ, but ye did not try sailin' through it!" cried Gibbs, his sword lowering.

My eyes stung, my head swam, and I blinked furiously to clear it. Air, I needed air. Ignoring the

swords still poised at me, I stumbled outside, tripping over a drunkard in the doorway. I cursed at him and started down the street and to the water. Stupid, so *stupid*.

I made it to the edge of the sea and stopped. Jack stood before me, his arms outstretched, his boots firm against the gentle lapping water.

A sudden curse made me turn. Jack stood behind me – his surprise was genuine, jumping back and nearly stumbling.

I looked between the two, alike as if a looking glass were placed between them. The Jack behind me took a few unsteady steps forward, his eyes so wide only a thin line of kohl could be seen. The other one before me stood steady.

A misty idea of the other Sparrow was forming. I thought of my sunken ship and crew; one thing I could be sure of was that he was a monster.

I lunged at the beast, my smallsword aiming for his neck. The other Jack somehow caught me by my midsection, unbalancing us both. The creature before me looked amused, licking his lips.

“What’re you doing?” hissed the real Jack into my ear. “That’s Elizabeth!”

Jack’s voice affected me like canon fire. I suddenly realised the truth of my pursuer, and of my pursued. The roaring in my ears sharpened into a high-pitched whine, my lungs dropped to my gut.

“No, it’s not,” I whispered, my legs barely supporting my frame.

“So you finally understand,” said the false Sparrow before us, his voice the sweetest song. “Seen one of me before, perhaps? And yet you aren’t frightened, which is nice. Of course.”

I drew myself up, falling back on my pride, my heart, my soul – should I have any left. I trembled like a kitten instead, but my words still swung like a cutlass. “And you thought to play with your food like an alley cat. How uncivilised.”

The doppelganger mock-curtsied.

“Siren?” asked Jack, arms loosening their hold. He felt solid, warm. Fragile.

“Never saw one of your ilk before. Wondered how you’d taste.” The siren smiled mirthlessly, baring sharp teeth. He looked to Jack, and whispered low, “I find pain sweeter than joy.”

I straightened, my expression blank. “So sorry to disappoint,” I said, both arms raising my sword to his terrible face. “But playtime’s over.”

“I bet you don’t even know how to kill –”

His voice cut off as his head parted from his shoulders. It swung through the air in a graceful arc, before landing with a soft splash in the distance.

“Apparently I do,” I intoned to the rapidly shrivelling body.

A hand on my shoulder made me start. I looked down at a worried Jack; his dark eyes a flickering candle. I shook myself, blinking quickly. The *human* Jack.

My heart ached.

“That young William can certainly craft a fine sword,” said Jack, his mouth less curious than his

eyes.

I nodded curtly. With shaking hands I drove the blade into the beach. So it stood, and so I intended to leave it. *Tainted. Like me.*

Keep your heart to yourself and your head below water.

I found myself being led by the waist, Jack's strong arm wrapped around me. He steered me away from the water, and passed me a flask.

"Never thought I'd see our dear Lizzie losing 'er head like that. Shame about the teeth. Beastie haunted you for long?"

"Long enough."

Stories of the great Captain Sparrow had eddied about for nearly two decades, and I wondered at his youthful face, just as I had done in Port Royal on our first meeting. At the time, I'd considered it a genetic lottery, a mix of foreign and heathen bloods besting the harsh elements of a life at sea.

Unless...

I tried to keep the hope from bubbling forth into my speech as I asked, "I suppose it might be prudent to ask whether you are indeed... human?"

"At ease, Commodore." Jack's golden teeth glinted in the moonlight, a small shard of light that bit into his words. "I am indeed adoubly human. A suave, enigmatic individual, I grant you. One familiar to these types of wicked things, an' all manners of witchcraft an' enchantment, aye. But I be normal, love."

His words stung, unintentionally callous. I schooled my expression, but not soon enough as he raised a dark eyebrow.

"Simply pondering on how normal might be too great a claim for the likes of you, Jack."

The wind picked up my voice and threw it across the waves. Jack heard, nonetheless. Indeed, he heard more than he thought.

"She took you for a spin, aye? That thing. T'was naught but a monster."

Monster.

"I don't offer this to many, but if you be needing." Jack continued. "Rum. Food. A mate. A spot on me ship. I'm here, Jim lad."

I looked down at my hands, where the nails had stained black from sooty earth. Jack's clothes shifted beside me, and though he moved closer, we did not touch.

"I don't suppose there be any sense askin' if you were..." I looked up, into his dark, bewitching eyes. He moved his hands vaguely, wiggling them like tentacles. He paused. "Not human?"

I clenched my jaw. I thought of all the ruin and pain brought forth by humanity. I saw grandmother's cold, dead eyes, her expression comatose as she floated in enchanted waters; she was not a monster, but a victim. I understood her now, and became aware as never before how glad I was to be apart from mankind. I stared at my beautiful destructor, his quirked hips a harbinger of lost hope, his kohl-lined eyes a Pandora's Box, and I shook my head.

“I don’t know how you can ask me that,” I told my monster, and I walked away.

Redemption

Chapter by [not my shell \(Attic Nights\)](#)

Chapter Notes

Just a couple of foreign words - I have provided hover translations (again).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack found me with the sea on my ankles and the morning sun on my back. I could hear his breathing was slightly laboured – he must have trekked a fair way before he found me.

“Why are you here?” I asked, watching the waves as they rolled against the bay’s sandbanks. My pelt was warm against my stomach, tucked into my waistband.

He called to me.

“I got your warnin’ about the hurricane. Warnings. Sss...” His voice trailed and rallied. “Figured you’d heed your warning, even if I didn’t.”

I was already quite aware of my foolishness. I ignored him, and wished him gone.

“So the *Dauntless* sunk? She were a beautiful bo- ship. My deepest sympathies.”

By my feet, the sea whispered to me – a soft hush as if it was the only sound in the world. Such an easy world it offered; so easy, in fact, that I could not fathom why I should not take it. It would take me, after all.

Jack came closer, treading with soft, splashing noises, upsetting the calm. “You’re welcome aboard mine. *Pearl* will doubtless welcome you; she’s funny like that.”

The monster’s voice eddied about, yet still I did not turn to face him.

He suddenly burst. “I’m apologising, you daft bastard! All this talk about bloody catchin’ me, but what about when you caught me, eh? What’d you think you’d do, keep me?” His arms waved in my peripheral vision.

“So you offer to keep me instead.” I turned to him. He looked ridiculous with his trouser cuffs soaked and his feet bare, his boots slouched on the shore. Where was his grace – his poise?

For a moment, Jack seemed stunned into silence. “*Help* you. I’m beggin’ to *help* you. Heaven knows why I—”

“I need no help,” I said to his shaking head.

“Jamie,” he said, and clutched my hand. His was warm, steady. “I’ve got a bit o’ business to do in town. What d’you say to coming with me, gimme offer a bit of a mull over, eh?”

I gazed down at our joined hands, and let them lead me.

“And what’s in Alexandria?” I mumbled, intrigued despite myself, my mouth full with the remains of some nutty ma’amoul that my monster had purchased for me.

“T’was a library!”

I coughed around a flask of mead – another purchase from Jack. I was beginning to feel kept, and I had said as much, but at least I felt some victory over the beast of famine.

“A heavy emphasis on *was*, don’t you think?”

“Thass why,” Jack said, stumbling forward a few steps. He then halted and turned back to face me. “We ain’t going to Alexandria. Only to the thing that isn’t in Alexandria anymore, but once was. Savvy?”

“Is your mind as chaotic as your speech?”

“Worse, love,” he said with an exaggerated wince. The wince, I noticed, distracted from his light fingers, which picked the pockets of a passing matron.

How could I ever deceive myself into believing I had feelings for a pirate? Life could be simpler now. I would go on the Pearl, commandeer it and return triumphant to Port Royal.

Presently, I rolled my eyes and caught his wrist. “Give it back.”

“Wot back?”

I answered by shoving my other hand into the folds of his shirt, ignoring the lightning that crackled from our proximity. I grasped two coins and ran to the matron.

“Madame! Madame!” I called, weaving through the crowd.

She spun at my hand on her shoulder, her lined mouth agape with indignation.

“You dropped this,” I said, holding out the coins and imploring that she understood.

She stared at the coins curiously, and then turned ancient eyes to me. Weathered hands checked her pockets, and a toothless smile cracked across her plump face.

“Thank you,” she enunciated carefully. “I am Tangou. You come.”

Bewildered, I looked back at Jack, but the matron held me firmly by the forearm and insistently dragged me down the street. Jack bounced after us both, a smile cracking his face in two as we passed under a doorway.

“Oi!” he said, and I rolled my eyes, careful to duck under a low beam. The smoke-stained inner room was dark, with hessian rags covering the windows. “You’re she, aren’t you? I’ve been lookin’ for you.”

Tangou let me go and I rubbed my abused arm, wincing. She glared at Jack. “He’s not looking for me,” she said, jerking her head towards me, “but he find.” She caught my eyes and smiled, her wizened face warm.

Flummoxed, I looked between Jack and Tangou.

“Alexandria,” he whispered loudly, and hummed, jerking his head toward the matron in the most unsubtle way possible. I bit down a smile.

Tangou pointed to a form reclining in a hammock, who looked masculine, but with hips as wide as their shoulders. “That’s Hammon.” A tall girl entered the room, her eyes to the ground. She carried a small basin of water in her hands. “This Farah.”

The girl placed the water by a chair and led me to it, gesturing for me to sit. I did so frowning. The cushion was soft, decadently so, but for a loose spring that dug into the back of my right knee. I shifted.

“Farah, is all in order?” asked Tangou.

Farah did not look up, soft curls spilling over her face. “Na’am.”

Tangou nodded, the sandy spider webs of her mouth relaxing.

Farah led Jack to me and forced him to kneel. Jack bit back the protests that ran plainly across his face, and acquiesced. I was curious; to forfeit his pride, whatever he sought must be valuable.

“Buts,” said Farah. I looked at her, uncomprehending. She looked at my legs, disapproving. Jack looked at a hole in my breeches, and gave it a curious prod.

“Like Farah said. Boots,” said Tangou, rearranging a few candles on the living room’s mantelpiece.

I peeled my boots off so Jack did not, and lowered my blistered feet into the basin. I curled my toes self-consciously.

“Now, there’s a little thing of –” began Jack, torso swivelling around, but Tangou cut him off with a wave of an arthritic hand.

“I have what you want. Wash first. You pay. I give.”

Jack bowed his head. Protests died on my lips as nimble hands caressed the tops of my feet. He worked down to my soles, and each rub cleared the skin of redness, cuts and pain. I gaped, lost under the rhythmic ministrations of my monster. My eyes grew heavy and I sighed.

My feet were raised from the basin and I opened my eyes to the vision of Jack drying them with a soft cloth. Having done so, he stood, rifling through his pockets.

I pulled on my boots, my face hot.

“A goblet owned by Akhenaten.”

Tangou scoffed. Jack blinked, looking at me for guidance, the proffered jewel-encrusted cup glittering coldly in the candlelight. I raised an eyebrow.

He began to rifle through his coat again. “Ah!” he shouted, triumphant, drawing out a beautiful clear knife. “An amber blade fashioned by Aphrodite ‘erself.”

I decided to aid the man who washed my feet. “Sometimes,” I said in a low voice, “Not all treasure is silver and gold.”

Jack’s eyes widened, before tearing them from mine. He fiddled with a tie in his hair.

“A feather o’ speech that holds within it all things left unsaid,” he rasped. He held out our

sparrow's feather and I tried not to stare.

"Is half." Tangou looked discontented, her mouth downturned, and I tensed imperceptibly. I should rather keep mine, in case I met with mermaids again.

"Mermaids?" She screeched, perhaps with glee. I started, realising she read my mind. "Am I not better than huta?"

I assuaged my discomfort by alighting on Jack's confounded expression. I shrugged off the moment's importance, and to my relief he relaxed.

Tangou looked between Jack and me, lingering obviously on my crotch. I resisted the urge to cover it with my hands. For a moment, her eyes flashed golden, and I wondered as to her humanity, or lack of it. She grinned slowly.

"You other half."

I grit my teeth. "I'd still rather keep it, if that's all the same to you."

"No, no." She waved her hands, frustrated, managing to smack Jack's away from an obsidian idol on the shrouded windowsill. She reached between her sagging bosom and produced from it a leather cylinder. Taking the feather she gave it to Jack, who snatched it from her like a child. He cast suspicious looks at us all, before lurching into the windowsill to study the revealed map. My piqued curiosity had not long to wait, as he spun around within moments, his dark eyes flashing and the leather chart billowing.

"This map is *incomplete*!" If he had a tail, it would be thrashing.

Tangou spied my crotch once more. She spoke to me, or rather to my groin. "You other half."

"I beg your pardon?" I asked, indignant. Other half? I stole a glance at Jack, my enchanter who appeared not to have enchanted our hosts, but he simply wiggled out a complicated gesture.

"Bollocks if I knew, mate. Ah... Apologies, ma'am."

I tampered down the feeling of upset that rose from that.

I reminded myself that I need never be his other half, nor give half myself to him.

Nimble young hands attacked my breeches and I jumped away in shock. Farah, flush behind my back, stared at me ingenuously; Hammon let out a snore that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. I frowned.

"Perhaps you want his hand?" asked Tangou slyly from beside the fireplace.

Suddenly, bells pealed from a nearby temple and our hosts stilled.

"You will go now." Tangou's voice was blank. Magic gushed sudden from the walls, half distracting me from her parting words: "May heart be true and soul live long."

Jack tugged me from the building with fingers entwined with mine. Somewhere near, a muffled scream gurgled into the street, running within it an ancient magic. In the distance, rainclouds began to roll, heavy and calm.

I became aware of the contact between us, and I broke it.

“Any idea what tha’ was all about?”

“No.” A thought crossed me. “Hold it. You said that map was incomplete?”

Jack took out the map again, and I peered at it over his shoulder. “Blast it! Gods! Devils!” He made as if to return. “With the spell she cast to chuck us, it slipped me mind.”

I stayed him with my hand, selfishly enjoying the fine bones of his wrist. They were as deadly as I remembered. “I believe I know what she meant.”

Chapter End Notes

Tangou, also known as *Tanit*, “was a Punic and Phoenician goddess, the chief deity of Carthage alongside her consort Ba`al Hammon. She was also adopted by the Punic Berber people. [...]There is significant, albeit disputed, evidence, both archaeological and within ancient written sources, pointing towards child sacrifice forming part of the worship of Tanit and Ba’al Hammon.” Poor Farah.

(From [Wikipedia](#))

Quay

Chapter by [not my shell \(Attic Nights\)](#)

In my eagerness to unravel a long-carried mystery, I managed to climb aboard the pirate ship without striking much thought, until the moment it did. The helm, of all things, struck me out of place.

Like the rest of the ship it was blackened as if charred; the smoothness of the grain under my hand would prove that wrong, if not for the clinging scent of ash. The wheel was larger than the *Dauntless*, perhaps by half a foot – just enough to be jarring. A parrot manned it, its eyes closed against the sun, and I was ready to leave this foreign ship when Jack's hand trailed up my sleeve.

I looked at him, and he jerked his head. "My quarters are this way, mate. You said you wanted privacy, didn't you?"

I became aware of the bustle around me, the crew readying for departure. Anamaria and a plump local girl tended to the sails; most others carried supplies, and the mute man, Mister Cotton, joined his parrot at the helm. I did not marvel at their efficiency, but I was jealous that they could continue when mine could not.

Most did not notice me; a few granted me cursory looks. Mister Gibbs seemed startled as I passed him below, dragging a bulging sack of citrus fruits.

Jack moulded the air with his hands. "We'll be taking on a new shipmate."

"Aye, Cap'n." Gibbs squinted and scratched his grizzled chops, but continued on his way, muttering to himself.

I swallowed.

I stood in Sparrow's cabin, and felt my impassive mask begin to slip. My hands felt empty and useless, so I clasped them behind my back. The cabin was both decent and languid, entrenched in equal swathes of colourful cloth and dust. I stared at a nest of papers huddled by the hearth. Trailing a finger along a three-legged desk, I wondered at the dust; perhaps the windows could not open.

"I'll be needing privacy, Mister Sparrow. If you would so oblige."

Jack raised an eyebrow at me. He sauntered over to the curtains I assumed shrouded his bed. He parted them with careless grace, and proved my assumption correct.

"Hope you don't mind, Jamie love, but I'll be needing to not leave you to wander my room in that privacy. All sorts of dangerous things lurking, if you'll be catchin' the paddle of me boat."

I nodded once. "Caught." I spied the changing screen – it had a hole in it halfway up the size of a hedgehog. I spared a thought as to what had happened to it.

I sat on his bed slowly, the action feeling incredibly intimate, and tugged off my boots. Placing them to one side, I scooted back onto the bed to draw the curtains. I checked the seams of the curtains twice, cursing my father silently as the *Pearl* began to canter across the waves.

The map fragment revealed itself as I undid my pantaloons. A few inches from my privates, it

covered an area of my inner thigh about five inches in diameter. The place had been chosen as it was unobtrusive, easily hidden from prying eyes, but this knowledge did not quell my current embarrassment. Exposed, I looked for something with which to cover myself.

My seal pelt lay exposed from where it had been secreted beneath my clothes, and I stuffed it impulsively under Jack's pillow. I grabbed the second pillow to cover myself. I spread my leg in a manner to most reveal the map, ensuring I was as decent as possible.

I cleared my throat, willing my face to cool. "Ready."

The curtains parted instantly.

Jack stared down at me for long moments, and I wished I could read his face.

My voice sliced through the air. "A faerie gave me it. My father tattooed it on me so it could never be lost."

He seemed then to notice the fragment displayed, and I looked intently at the top of his head while he examined it with his eyes. Time seemed to drag by, marked only by the lapping of water against the *Pearl's* hull.

Eventually, Jack spoke, his voice rough. "Aye, that would do it."

He stood unsteadily, and pulled out from his pocket the leather cylinder containing Tangou's map. It unrolled onto the bed, and I saw that my fragment was not so much of a waterscape, or even a landscape, but an archaic rendition of a key with which to unlock the map's details. Jack began to inspect it more thoroughly, tactile now, flattening my flesh.

"Interesting. That's very interesting."

"I might be convinced to transcribe it," I offered, mouth dry as Jack's rough hand traced an aquiline shape on my fragment. The hand lifted to draw a mirrored shape on his map. My offer was mostly empty, as I could no longer quite see the ends of the lines that wrapped around me so, but I was sure I could manage something with a looking glass.

"Good idea." He pulled back suddenly, rolling his map tightly. I lowered my eyes to the pillow, and he hesitated, still hovering beside me on his bed.

"No' a single hair on your body," he marvelled. His fingers fluttered curiously up my calf.

I refrained from rolling my eyes. Why would we, when I have my pelt? That there was hair at all on our human-like heads was a miracle.

"Can you grow a beard?" he asked, and suddenly he was there, peering at my face, his fingers poised scant inches from my cheek. "Is that dirt or is that stubble? Fuzz-wuzz? Grecian moss? A lad's moustache?" He touched it, feeling that I had indeed facial hair.

"Jack," I warned.

He seemed to read something in my face. He swung a leg over my hips and settled down onto the pillow covering me.

"What about this chest, eh?" he asked in a low voice. Work-blackened hands rested lightly at my shirt buttons, ready to pull away. I did not want them to stop, but I had to say otherwise.

I stayed silent.

Our breathing filled the room, soft-heavy and heated. Then Jack moved – or perhaps I did – and the buttons popped open one by one. As I was revealed, he examined my skin gently, curiously. He looked upon it as if every inch of me had tattooed on it a thing of value.

I averted my eyes from the scrutiny.

An enterprising pinkie traced around my nipple. “None here, either. What a curious thing you be. I wonder...” He shifted, dragging light fingers down my twitching stomach.

I was achingly, painfully hard. I resisted rolling my hips upwards into his devastatingly warm weight. Instead, I allowed my hand to rest by my hip, clutching Jack’s still-clothed thigh. The rocking motions of the ship below tempted me, at once sweet and maddening.

A cacophony of sound above caused us to jerk apart. We stared at each other, eyes wide, until the sounds grew closer.

“In the water! In the water!” cried Gibbs, followed by a pounding at the door.

Jack leapt from our embrace and my heart sunk. The air replacing him seemed a vacuum, sucking everything in and leaving nothing but a cold sweat. The human barrelled out the door before I recovered wits enough to cover my legs.

I followed slowly, my limbs uncooperative. The *Pearl* had slowed, and the large majority of the crew appeared captivated by something portside. I held back, not curious as to what held their regard, until I heard a feminine voice call out.

“Green-eyed James! James, please I know you’re there!”

“We got no Jems aboard!” shouted Anamaria, her sword drawn. Brave pirate.

There was more splashing. Then, “I can save your heart, just please come out!”

I pushed through the crowd, my blood suddenly aflame. I peered over the rail, and saw to my surprise the mermaid who had first guided me to her coven, back near Sardinia. She spied me and let forth a happy cry.

“Is that you, green-eyed James?”

I nodded, “Yes.”

She swallowed. “I come seeking asylum. They’re dead – my sisters, my queen. Dead!”

“Dead?” I echoed, mindful of the strange looks and low mutterings that hung toxic about the crew like a fog. “Why should I believe you?”

She breathed heavily, her ichthyoidal limbs sluggish in the choppy sea. “You can’t, I know. But the boys poisoned our food, and ran our corpses through until the water bled. The sharks... I was on patrol; they came after me once I realised what had happened. Please,” she implored, struggling to keep up with the *Pearl*’s gentled pace. “I mean no harm.”

Jack appeared at my side, tricorn atop his head, and his lips soft, parted as if to talk. I shook my head, and to my surprise, his jaw fastened with a click.

“You mean no harm because you can do no harm,” I called, correcting her. I mentioned not that my

song was stronger than hers, nor that hers made no effect on me. Her song would affect the crew, however. But she knew me a beast, and thus she knew not of my want to preserve human life; I did not attempt to educate her. "If we grant you asylum, what then?"

"Then I intend to go to the Aegean and warn the main coven. I think..." She spoke haltingly, and cast a look about the rest of the crew. "I think they intend to declare war on the mermaids. We treated the boys not well, I grant, but nothing to deserve this. If the merfolk fall, then what?"

I drummed my fingers against the railing. It could be anarchy for the Mediterranean ruling power to destabilise. Though numerous and not always just, at least the mermaids seldom consumed otherkind, unlike sirens, another powerful faction. They were even marginally preferable to the kappa, the mighty skeleton whales that protected the seas of Japan. I pursed my lips and looked to Jack, who I was surprised to find watching me.

"Do we have a tub, or bath? A very large bucket?" I asked him softly.

"Lads! We've caught ourselves a mermaid," he summarised in a loud voice. The crew stood to attention. "Cotton! Get the bath, fill it with the sea! Marty, fresh fish from the kitchen! Gibbs!"

"Aye Captain?"

He leaned in close to his first mate. "Locate cotton wool and fabric scraps for the crew. For our ears."

Gibbs nodded sagely. "Aye sir."

I suppressed a smile; if anyone had supplies and a contingency against magical beasts, it would be Gibbs.

Jack turned to me. "Jamie?"

"Aye Sir?" I said, and nearly winced.

"In ya pop." He made a vague shooing motion, supplemented with a brief inspection of the water. "Right, you lot!"

As he started ordering his crew into constructing a pulley and rope, I peeled off my shirts, my feet still bare. I stopped myself at my flies, instinct wanting me to strip nude. I felt heavy eyes upon me, and looked back to see Jack reviewing my exposed form. My skin warmed under the scrutiny of those eyes that flitted up and down, and I turned away.

Clambering onto the railing, I executed a balanced dive, slicing through the water with nary a splash. Surfacing, I grasped the cast rope and gestured the mermaid closer. She came to me, a sour look on her face.

"I could have done this myself," she hissed.

"I don't doubt it. Unfortunately, they have quaint ideas about these sorts of things. Cling on and try not to draw blood. What's your name, anyway?"

With an ironic flick of her wrist, she stiffly wrapped herself around my form, her cold tail encircling my legs. Her small body relaxed into mine, the last trembles of her muscles quivering into my strong form. I realised then how exhausted the proud mer was.

She sighed. "I'm Sappho."

There were grunts from above as we were gradually lofted from the blue. Sappho stared over my shoulder, her chin resting in the crook of my neck, but did start to tense as we hoisted over the railing. I secured her against my body once more, and rose. Jack was nowhere to be seen.

“‘Ow’d you find the Commodore, anyway?’” asked a pockmarked caulker. I knew not his name, which sat uneasy with me. For the past year, I had endeavoured to know the *Black Pearl* inside out in an attempt to grant the law a firmer grasp of her flighty ways. I was then surprised that he knew me on board at all; news must travel fast around this ship.

In answer to the caulker, Sappho flexed her claws, and I imagined her slapping him with an expression that could melt storms and freeze deserts. “Please don’t insult me, *human*. We track any soul, ‘specially family.”

I was aware of a sudden silence and heavy stares. Anamaria’s hand was poised on her sword’s hilt. I drew myself up.

“I do trust you can all plainly see I have no tail,” I said dryly. “We’re family in nothing but honour – though that honour is rather dubious, since before now I never considered us particularly close. After all, a good sailor knows what to expect from his waters.”

The mermaid shrugged, and raised her head to look at me, flashing me a smile, winsome but false, with her sharp copper teeth. Her eyes inspected me disdainfully, the only crack in her wanton, subservient act. “If we were truly related I would be very disappointed.”

Petite Mort

Chapter by [not my shell \(Attic Nights\)](#)

I sent Cotton out of the small cabin under the instruction to locate Marty. That he obeyed me came as little surprise. I turned to Sappho and knelt by her bath, my breeches still dripping.

“You said you could save my heart.”

She leaned close, beckoning for my ear. I drew close enough for her fangs to scrape the nape of my neck, and held.

“Swim away,” breathed she.

I jerked back. “What?” I hissed, outraged. “That’s it? Keep your heart to yourself and your head below water? Fool, my father told me that when I was a boy. You bring no news.”

“So your father was wise.” She shrugged, reclining back into her bucket, claws steepled. “I needed you to talk. Why can’t you?”

“Swim away? I have obligations.”

“One of the landlubbers called you a Commodore, but your clothes are torn. Your little vessel sunk. I’m guessing whatever you were above surface sunk below with it.” She smiled.

I studied a wooden otter atop a crate, suddenly curious as to its construction. Its sleek figure did dash from a mahogany stream, wooden whorls the pebbles from which it made its leap. The otter rose in a way that my ship could not – that I could not, not ever again. A flick of water surfaced me from my thoughts. I looked to her.

“If you make it to the main coven, could you also find a way to pass a message on for me?”

She nodded, casting ripples on the water’s surface. “I suppose I might. What?”

“It’s for the Swanns of Port Royal, Jamaica. A Missus Elizabeth Turner, or her father, Governor Weatherby Swann. Tell them... tell them I resign my position.”

She nodded again, and I noticed her face fall stoic.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her, my voice low.

With an annoyed frown, she turned away slightly. “Nothing.”

I realised myself familiar with that look. “Are you worried about your position with the main coven?” She was silent, but her eyes dropped. “What they might think? Do?”

Her chin jerked out. “Are you surprised?”

“No. I am relieved.”

Her sharp face relaxed. “Thank you.”

“We have an accord?”

“Aye aye, green-eyes,” she sing-songed.

“Don’t make me sing to you,” I warned, deadpan. She hissed and splashed water from her tub, her arm travelling through to land on the panelling with a sharp *thunk*. I jumped to her side, but as I did so, I saw behind us a figure slouched in the doorway.

Jack must not have noticed my awareness of his presence, as when I glanced in the reflection of Sappho’s mirror-like claws, his eyes were soft and watchful. I inspected the mermaid’s hand, but she pulled away with alacrity.

“I don’t like you, you know,” she said.

I raised an eyebrow at her, wondering what that had to do with anything.

“My queen might have had a fondness for green, but I am rather more for gold.” Her brown eyes looked to me for understanding.

Though I did not, I nodded. “Do you come bearing fish, Sparrow?” I drawled, feeling suddenly tired.

Jack started, bouncing into the room as if it had been his intention all along. “What’s our course, Jim lad?”

Sappho let her hand flex underwater, and I was pleased to see it mostly unharmed. “The Aegean.”

“Tha’,” Jack slurred, staring forlornly at his presumably empty flask of rum. He flung an arm out wide. “Is a five day sail away.” He pulled a face.

“Just get me close enough. I can swim the rest. Our kind will be grateful – should you assist us your souls shall never have to fear us.”

“Pirate, love.” Jack flashed her a smile, his gold teeth glinting sharp. “Gonna need more than slippery words of honour. We’ll be running a risk, keeping you.”

Sappho’s copper teeth flashed in answer. “Deliver me safe and I swear mermaids shall never harm you, your ship, or your crew. As for treasure, we have none to give that has monetary value.”

I rocked back onto my heels, amused. I could easily see her in the law courts with her serpentine definitions and loopholes.

But Jack was sharper. “Then I request ye grant us something that James ‘ere would find valuable. As incentive, love.”

The mermaid floundered, a pensive expression pinching her brow. She looked between Jack and me with wide eyes, and I shook my head at her unvoiced question, my heart racing.

“Not yours to give, child of the Mediterranean,” I said, my voice level.

Jack’s hand snaked around my upper arm and I swallowed, feeling branded. I silently cursed my fair complexion and stayed my eyes on Sappho. “I recommend you do as the captain asks.”

Jack’s hand guided me outside, to where Cotton and his parrot stood guard, a bucket of fish in the elderly man’s grasp. They exchanged a nod, before I was led towards Jack’s cabin, propping up the esteemed captain as much as he steered us the way. “Thought Mr. Cotton could look after our fine fishy friend.”

“I thought him mute, not deaf.”

Jack shrugged, opening his cabin door for me. I strode through, my heart pounding. “Eunuch, no doubt of it.” My monster made a snipping motion with his fingers and I stared at him, while willing myself that I would not.

The door locked behind us with a heavy click.

“It comes to my attention that you did not answer in negation of being a monster, and therefore henceforth, are perhaps not as human as my crew might believe.”

“Indeed.” I eyed him warily. Just how long had he been by the doorframe?

“Indeed, *I am a beastie*, or indeed *I am human*?”

“You seem fairly convinced of my being a monster.”

Jack walked right up to peer into my face. My pulse quickened, and I regulated my breathing, forcing myself against a deep inhalation of Jack’s scent. *Rum. Bread slightly damp, slightly salty.*

“You’ve sent dozens to the gallows; I’d be surprised if you weren’t.”

I clenched my jaw and held his gaze.

Jack’s voice lowered, sultry. “Now, I be thinking, Jamie love, that not all monsters are men, and not all men are monsters. Many are, but being one don’t excuse being the other. Now a pirate might be redeemable, but a gallows can’t ever forgive... *I can forgive, for the right leverage – savvy? So what say you, beastie?*”

“I wonder why you think me a beastie.”

“The question is no’ whether you are, but whether you’re willing to say that you are.”

My pride refused me to drop my eyes from his. These eyes did appear like pools and my truth dived forth, unbidden, into his dark depths.

“I call myself a selkie,” I whispered, my stomach bottoming out with each condemning word.

I swallowed and made to turn around, but Jack had got his arms on me.

“Truth looks good on you, love.”

His lips turned on mine and I gasped, lost.

I had fantasised of our first kiss many times, but the reality seemed somehow more unbelievable. An earnest tongue paid entrance to my mouth with a quick nip. This tongue felt carefully along my teeth and I reached it, curious. Never had a single kiss felt so exciting, and with trembling hands, I held him close. When Jack retreated, I followed, chasing him into his mouth.

He pulled back with a soft gasp. “No strange needle-y teeth. Good.”

“Do you know what you do to me? What you will do?” I asked, my heart aching. *I had* to stop.

“I have an idea,” he answered, smiling shyly.

Baring my shoulder, he kissed my neck. There he teased me with lightly sucking lips that were wet

and sharp. I found the backs of my knees hitting his bunk, though I know not who led us there. Bouncing onto the bed as I sat, we separated for a moment, and I took the time to pull my shirt back over the now-damp flesh of my shoulder.

Jack kohl-rimmed eyes were coy as he plucked at the buttons to my shirt.

“Don’t hide,” he whispered.

I swallowed, my head abuzz, my skin burning. My fingers trembled as I undid my shirt. With his warm, lithe body crawling over me, I did lower onto my back. I felt bolder. Locking our lips together again, I grasped sharp hipbones and ground into his answering heat. I wondered at how different he tasted from imagination – less fantastic, so solid and warm, and slightly tart in those wet depths.

Jack seemed to have a similar train of thought, because when he pulled back with his tanned face beautifully flushed, he said, “It’s the sea.” He breathed deeply and rocked so I could feel his hardness against mine. A pink tongue dashed between his lips. “You’re her, and you’re more.”

And you are the devil.

The *Pearl* lurched and I used the momentum to sit up, Jack still straddling my hips. His coat and shirt were in the way, so I pulled at them until they tumbled loose from his soft skin. One hand I used to anchor him in place so I could sample his collarbone. It curved smooth like a soup spoon and tasted like salt. The other I used to explore the hair that grew on his chest – it seemed to lead down and down...

Having been led below his waistband, my fingers dipped to entangle with a thatch of thick, coarse hair. Jack pulled back to stand, and I grunted, trying to haul him back. He chuckled dryly.

“Just a mo’...”

I watched transfixed as his clever hands unwound his breeches and tugged off his boots, until he stood bare before me. Such proud beauty was never meant for one like me, and the thought had me wanting to avert my eyes. I did not, and noticed his scars.

They adorned his body like one might bear tattoos – and he had those, too. I thought about inking him myself, branding him as he had done me – no, as he *could* do to me. Elbowing that thought away, I kneeled before him on the hard wooden floor, upset by the hurt that he must have borne, and pressed a kiss to a starburst on his thigh. Above me, Jack breathed raggedly, hands coming to clutch at my hair. His musk was strong down here, and I nuzzled up a thin white scar line to drag my lips to the hollow between hip and hair.

I was not unaware of the cock standing proud by my cheek. Indeed, I thought it one of the loveliest things I have ever beheld. It stood because of me, it dripped because of me, and that delicate upwards twitch? Well, I considered that for me, too.

“So lovely, Jack.”

Jack swayed, his cock swaying too, slightly out of tandem with the ship, but no less graceful. Stilling him with hands firm on his behind I kissed him on the very tip. The preseminal fluid that so pooled there tasted bitter and salty; I closed my eyes, feeling fit to burst. Yes, Jack was definitely the devil.

I had barely suckled half his length when Jack pulled back. For a moment, I made to follow, but was halted by the firm hands in my hair. I opened my eyes and looked up into a dark, bewitching

face. Guiding me up and backwards, he pushed me onto his bed with hands still in my hair.

I landed with an, “Oof” – and Jack chuckled softly.

He released my hair to stroke my face; before long he was there tugging at my flies, trying to release me. I went to assist him, but he stalled that hand and entwined it with one of his own, to raise above my head. With just one hand left he managed to free me, my member swollen and rigid. He grasped me with a grip so warm and firm. His touch was electric and I bucked, the world narrowing to our connection.

“Naught a hair down here, too,” he rasped, gold teeth winking.

Writhing on the bed sheets, our joined hands managed to slip under a pillow. White light burst in front of my eyes, and I barely managed to hold back my completion, shouting. Jack had touched my pelt – we both had, and that would have been enough to sober me into logic, had it not felt so surprisingly exquisite. No one had ever touched my pelt before; the act was unbelievably, incredibly intimate. Gulping for air, I opened my eyes to Jack’s curious face.

He studied me carefully, the hand on my cock squeezing a rhythm, and touched my pelt again. Electric fingers wove through my fur, and I felt it as keenly – if not more – than if it had been on my current skin. The sensation sparked through me, beyond me and bit down into me to never let go. I became aware of a keening, wanton sound, but felt no embarrassment when I realised it mine.

Dark eyes held mine, coming closer. Soft lips came down to kiss the tip of my nose, and with that simple act, I was undone.

By the time I returned to awareness, Jack was nuzzled up behind me, like a kitten cozing up to a lamb. His head barely reached my shoulders, his feet curled around my calves. He kissed between my shoulder blades, his heavy cock sticky in its place at the small of my back. He shifted then, arm moving from its place around my midsection, so that his cock could be rearranged to slot between my thighs.

I felt guilty. He had not come, yet he had managed to move the world for me. The thought stilled when I realised my lower half was completely bare; he must have stripped me while I remained in the maw of bliss.

“Alrigh’?” he asked, and I wondered how he knew me awake.

“Perfect,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head, his nose tracing the movements onto my spine. “Hush. Don’t be. All the time in the world.”

I swallowed, my body still boneless. “What does your crew think of me?”

I fancied I could feel a smile among those kisses that littered my back. “We could legitimately be doing work in here and that lot’ll still think us doing the flip flop piranha.”

So I am to be reclassified, from pirate hunter to concubine? The thought was ridiculous, and I recognised the teasing for what it was – a distraction from his unwillingness to answer my question.

“You often bring your crew to your bed?” I pulled from his embrace and turned so that he could see my smile. He threw his leg over my hip and I took the opportunity to stroke his goatee, curious of his coarse hair and hanging beads.

“Nah, but they be worse gossips than a church social. I ain’t complaining.” He shot me a glance that heated my face. “Good for me standing – you’re outta my league.”

He fondled my sensitive length carelessly. I was ashamed to see that his had still not lost its hardness, despite my selfishness. I went to return some sort of pleasure when he spoke.

“Tell me about the creatures o’ the deep.”

I paused.

“The blue whale is the largest –” I broke off as Jack smacked my thigh, laughing. It was a good, hearty sound, and one that I cannot remember ever matching. Then silence gathered and my heart spluttered.

I pulled him closer and breathed into his hair. Rum, apples, earth. Not quite like me – at least not yet. “No one can say for certain what a siren truly looks like, or if indeed they have a true form. They know naught as to how they appear to others. They’re the boggarts of desire.”

Jack looked up at me askance, and I shook my head, avoiding his eyes.

“A siren,” I continued, my voice soft into his ear, “Appears as its observer’s most cherished. It matters not who, or how many people observe it, as the illusion is not on the siren itself but in the observer’s mind. Parents see their children drowning, or brothers their siblings, lovers their other halves...” My eyes shut. “So you saw our dear Elizabeth and I... I saw you.”

“Me?” He seemed startled. I glared at him. “You cherish me?”

“You don’t have to believe it, but...” I trailed off as Jack fluttered away, rifling through his strewn clothes. His cock bounced as he did so, a line of preseminal fluid connecting him unbroken to my stomach for an impossibly long time. His warmth returned and he pressed his broken compass into my fingers. “What on earth do you think you’re doing?”

Jack held his fingers aloft in wait. The compass spun and rested on Jack. I swallowed. “What—”

“So you do love me.” He grinned, his eyes calculating.

I felt like hitting the man. An exhausted candle lay within reach and my fingers twitched towards it.

As if reading my thoughts, Jack slipped between my weapon and me. Straddling me. I fell back sighing into the bed, incapacitated.

Warmth surged afresh to my groin. The thought that I should stop this was far, far away.

“Tell me about se’hellky.”

“Selkies.”

“Selkies,” Jack repeated. Smiling slowly, he began to rock our hips in pace with the gentle stride of his ship.

“Well,” I drawled. “We’re strong. Not terribly so – just *hardy*.” Quirking an eyebrow with the last, I grasped Jack’s rigid length. He bucked forward, his thighs smooth as they slid along my sensitive cock.

“I can hold my breath for a frightfully long time, you know. Would you like to see?”

His pupils had swallowed his eyes in tar. By the dying sun that radiated through cabin windows, he did look so glorious. I wished I could shape the light and crown him in it, so I could always see him as he was right now: a paragon of divinity.

“Sounds like one of them demonstrative whatsits.” His relaxed face grinned. “Wouldn’t mind some educating, under such a fine teacher.”

“You’re quite the eager student. Right – lay back with your knees bent. Good, Jack. That’s it.”

I arranged myself between his legs; with one last look upwards, I swallowed his length to the root. He cried out, a sweet sound I would like to hear again. Hollowing my cheeks, I bobbed up and down his length, my rhythm slightly upset by the jerking sea below. He tasted strong in my mouth, bitter but heady. I fancied he could have tasted of week-old milk and still I would think it the finest wine.

His hands hovered by his taut stomach, and without stalling my task I placed them on my head. They grasped and my hair fell loose from its tie. He moaned above me, his hips jerking upwards and his cock driving deep. I grabbed the opportunity to place my hands under his raised cheeks. Squeezing and moulding the firm globes, Jack trembled all over with tantalising little huffs of breath. Under my encouraging hands, he began to thrust into my throat.

Curiosity compelled me to spread his cheeks and slip a finger to his entrance. I startled when I felt wetness there. Disengaging from his cock, I pushed his knees towards his chest to get a better view. A creamy white rivulet escaped sluggishly from his hole.

“Thass not a long time. I know—”

“Is this me?” I interrupted, trailing a finger carefully through an errant white drop. I looked up in time to see him smile bashfully. He removed it when he saw me watching.

“Ah. Had some fun while you were recovering. Had to put it somewhere, and you didn’t bring your wig with you. Oversight, mate. Outrageous. You don’t mind, do you love?”

I groaned, leaning my face into his held knee. I imagined him taking my release and slicking it inside his channel with wicked fingers. I fancied tasting us combined. I imagined driving into him, leaving the ejaculate there myself. My cock twitched plaintively, semi-hard, my index finger worrying his entrance. I shook my head and caught his eyes.

Carefully, I lowered down onto his member once more, showing him with my mouth and fingers just how taken I was with the idea.

After that, he did not last long. He tensed and moaned, and then he cried out my name as if it were his whole world.

“*James.*”

Swallowing the vestiges of his release, I stretched out slowly. I brushed his cheek with the back of my hand. “Jack?”

He mumbled and attached himself to me like a limpet. With a smile, I pulled the sheets over us. I tucked his sleepy head under my chin, his skin soft on my breast, and caressed his strangely rough hair. A tiny thread on his bandanna was unravelling, and I pulled at it without thinking. It lengthened and lengthened, escaping from its kin, until I realised I had to let it go. I did so, embarrassed, and hoped he would not notice my destruction.

He did not; his eyes were closed and his breath was even. I wanted very much to keep him safe.

I was very much aware that I couldn't.

I pulled Jack tighter, and he grunted amusingly, twisting his golden body into an impossible shape. I closed my eyes and let sleep claim me.

Shake and Crush

Chapter by [not my shell \(Attic Nights\)](#)

The impossibility of the situation dawned with the sun. Just as bleakly, and just as cold.

Jack did not stir as I gathered my pelt and for that, I was grateful. In my chest, almost to my throat, my heart did beat burning and fierce, and I was sure I could never speak nor explain to him why I must go. How could I tell him that he was my beautiful destructor? That he could ruin me with a smile; take my heart and soul as easily as any demon.

Ruin was a yoke I was unwilling to let my Sparrow bear. Though he was a pirate who pillaged and stole, mocked and fled, he never took people unwilling. This fact so fiercely gossiped in high society – as though the absence of rape was more distressing than its presence, just because it was unexpected – convinced me he could no more steal my heart than Elizabeth's virtue.

He did look so peaceful in the weak light, with the colours just beginning to bleed into the morning air. No. I set my jaw. I did not want to lose my heart, any more than I could let Jack deal with the guilt of taking it. So I would cast myself free, and in the process free him, too.

My clothes sprawled lifeless across the floor, entwined with cast sheets, and I thought about leaving them. Symbolic of never returning to land, my head set below water for eternity. But such an existence would be a cage, as much as land. I gathered them and dressed.

Jack stirred as I tugged on a boot. He mumbled and kicked his feet, still half-asleep. I went to him.

“Sleep, Jack,” I said, my voice soft and steady. A strange urge to sing, or even hum, washed over me, and I swallowed it down. “Shh Jack... I’m just going to get some food for us,” I lied.

He relaxed entirely, and nodded into his pillow, a corner of a smile still peeking out.

I gathered my pelt and I left him, forever.

I stole through the ship, slowly at first, then quickly, until I was sprinting. A fear hung heavy over me that if I were to stop, I would go back.

Leaping over a startled drunk anchored by the mizzenmast, I aimed my course towards the stern. Shouts and footsteps chased me, soft under the buzzing of my ears; I sprung with a foot firm against the *Pearl's* blackened sides, throwing myself overboard.

The water crashed dark above my head before I knew I was under it. I cried out, my voice producing not sound but bubbles, and thought about letting myself drown.

My pelt had other ideas – already it snaked around my ankles and up my beating chest, crushing my form and moulding me anew.

Lord, what a fool I be.

The blanket of water, which usually embraced me as warmly as a friend, instead smothered and blurred. Writhing neptune grasses contorted as I swam over them listlessly, my thoughts cross and without direction. To the left, a school of bluefin tuna skittered away from me, their silver sickle-shaped tails sending ripples to my whiskers; I watched them go, and continued to drift.

The ocean cared not; I was a shadow of my former glory. No Admiralty awaiting me in a few years time. When I retired, there would be no warm cat to sleep on my lap during a cold English winter; I would not forgo a good book to watch snow tumble behind my seaside manor's windows. But alas, that life was never mine to live for long. Common folk would wonder at the way my hair seemingly never greyed, my face never sagged. I would, probably, age somewhat; I had once met a selkie with silver streaks in her hair, but she was ancient, and would recall the first Roman boats, and Avalon as girt by sea.

When I was younger, I would think of strategies wherein I could live among humans, and not be condemned. If I had money enough I once thought of purchasing several homes, and moving afresh from prying eyes. In my fantasies, I always thought of myself as grand. Moneyed, dashing, and utterly respectable in society.

A Commodore who commanded his ship and crew through a hurricane out of obsession was not a good man. He was a monster. With my sharp muzzle, I appeared as much to the fish – and oh, how they shy away! – but here, under the waves, I was less of a monster than I ever was when I donned my powdered wig.

Perhaps I would live a simple life. I could be an angler in Penzance, or a boat carpenter in Stockholm. I could tame water kelpies in Inverness, or manage tea in Bengal. I could till my small garden by the ocean near Casablanca, and stare at dark ships skimming over crystal waters. I could blow bottles for rum, bottles that might never touch Jack's lips, and it would be simple. I could be satisfied to watch sparrows nest in my villa in Corfu and I would never think of him again.

I would be free to live an unmonstrous life. Would I be satisfied to watch birds wheel in a foreign sky, and know that I was as free as they? To have tasted satisfaction, a heady brew, but one I could never match again; the satisfaction I tasted had held promise of more, a story of fault-lines and joy.

I shook myself. I could still feel joy. Joy was as simple as biting into a fresh apple. As easy as a glass of sun-warmed wine on an autumnal day. To prove my point I swam in tight coils. I kept swimming as such, tighter and tighter, until my flippers ached. I floated listlessly, feeling nothing but the pounding of my heart.

I peered through a heavy veil of plankton. I did not love *him*. I could not, and therefore I did not.

It was better this way, I affirmed. If I were to go back and give him my heart like a brainless fool, Jack would still wither and decay – if he survived that long. Should a miracle occur and he outlived the next decade, still getting slower at dodging swords and his liver pickling but holding. His face would be lined – big sprawling wrinkles that burst from the sides of his eyes. He might lose his teeth, and I would have to cook special meals for him. He would creak and groan, and each morning I would have to help him from bed. His hair would go white as salt and I would have to pry arthritic hands from their locked grip around the *Pearl's* wheel. He would smile at the sea and forget his age, and demand to waltz around a campfire when he *knew* it would jimmy his knees. He would forget other things, little things, like whether we had had tea, and he would mumble about youth as he became forgotten himself. I would catch his words before I knew them to be his last. I would be there to hold him as his frail body tumbled against the foremast, as he breathed his shaking last, and never smiled again.

Everything began to ache. I had always been a little selfish. I was selfish with Elizabeth and in return I lost her heart to someone better. If I lost my heart to Jack, *with* Jack, I would become a monster. I would ravage the seas and shore as my grandmother had done before me, before her imprisonment. She never left any survivors, no one to tell of her destruction. They *would* speak of me, as I would be a proud, mighty harbinger of blood and insanity. Ruin ships and consume mortal

flesh – I would be more feared and loathed than I ever was as the pirates' hangman.

But I would do so having first lived, a small voice whispered, gentle and comforting in my head, its words most worrying. Selfishly, obsessively, but whole and complete, be it for three months or three decades.

Even if it must make a monster of me.

I realised I did love him, and so my heart slipped free.

The pain overwhelmed me, shaking and crushing. It was a physical thing, wrenching and ripping until the heart had torn and was no longer my own. As if on a timer, my chest thumped quicker. Only an organ remained – it beat as a complex mechanism, simply pumping blood around my body. My soul did tremble and explode as if it were a supernova, glowing and glowing, and I knew it would keep doing so until the day it didn't, and became instead a black hole. Until then, until that day, Jack could cradle it, crown himself with it, and it would be the greatest gift I would ever give. Colours burst and rippled, ribboning and stitching themselves into places anew, and the world became beautiful again.

I watched with despair as my heart and soul melted away, eager for their new home. Despite their departure, I felt no emptiness, and instead felt *more*.

I wondered if Jack felt anything.

Probably not.

Swallowing past the ache in my chest, I wondered. Did he love me back? Would he notice my heart? Suddenly, I started at a tickle in my whiskers. A loggerhead turtle stirred the water beside me, passing close to my rear. I glared at it, overwrought, but then I blinked. There was a teardrop in the water, shed from a mortal's cheek. Resembling a falling star, it moved just as fast. Glowing with magic, the teardrop touched me on my nose, and melted into me.

It was a distraction, but not one that I wanted. I was being Summoned.

Alarmed, I dashed to the surface to breathe. Exhaling, I dived once more and swam, the teardrop's enchantment already starting to affect my skin. I sped in the direction from whence the tear had come, and it was not long before a second came shimmering toward me. It hit my chest, and my limbs started to lengthen. Flattening my front flippers to my sides, I propelled myself with strong sideways motions of my back flippers.

Faster I swam, my muscles burning. If the magic were to change me before I could reach my summoner –

A third smacked right into my eye. Honestly, it was as if it had no decorum at all. I closed that eye, now blurry to the depths, and pushed on.

Minutes and miles passed before the next splattered my rear, and I realised with a jolt my course was slightly askew. I corrected it, the water beginning to claw like ice against my uninsulated back. Here, the fish were fewer, the boats more, and I hoped I was close.

Numbers five and six hit in quick succession, and I darted with alacrity around the nets and anchors that loomed ready for me. These penultimate tears sought to wash the coat off me, my bones lengthening but without pain, the magic evoked by the Summoning easing transformation.

The seventh tear came slowly, and tapped me almost apologetically on my breast. With it, my pelt

melted off my skin and I was human once more. I held my fur and kicked to the surface gasping, my heart racing. Rubbing my salt-stung eyes, I looked about me, for an instance ignoring the magic that demanded I go on. Though it was dark, a billowing sky shrouding a silver sliver of moon, I recognised the landscape from etchings in the Swanns' library.

Tying my pelt around my hips, I swam sluggishly and loudly through the sombre waters of Misrata. More tears still touched me, impotent now, but they lit the way like little darting fireflies. They beckoned me towards a jetty crouched low over its bleak waters.

Jack's legs dangled in this water, his feet bare. I swam below for the last length, so the water would bury my sounds. I surfaced by his bare feet, with darkness dripping down my face.

Jack stared at me, his face opening like a carp. He dropped his rum flask in the water, and I retrieved it for him. I wondered if he knew he had Summoned me; if he did not, I had no intentions to tell him.

"Why are you here, Jack?" I asked softly, mindful not to let my teeth chatter.

Drunken – almost pickled – Jack blinked, and closed off his expression.

"Man wen' overboard." He gazed at the wood on which he sat, picking from it splinters with his nails. A few splatters of rain soaked into the jetty.

I placed a waterlogged hand beside his, a heartbeat from holding it in mine, right there on the docks. I longed to tell him how radiant he was, and how devastating, too.

"What about Sappho, the Aegean?" I asked instead.

Jack snorted, his voice slurring. "She's screechin' a windstorm worse than Anamaria's singing. Naught that she can do that she's not already done. Speaks mighty fine English, that fish, tail has almos' no accent. Uses curses me mam would be proud of. Gibbs's in there now with the banshee, ears plugged up better than the *Pearl* and preachin' her some *Paradise Lost*."

Jack's face turned slowly into the shadows. "He's worried about her kind. They're all worried about 'er kind."

I feel ashamed. Jack took the mermaid in on my behest, after all. "And you? Are you worried?"

"Only 'bout you." The admittance seemed to cost him, but to me it was a priceless gift. I grew hopeful, but forced myself steady.

"Then your crew has more sense than you do." Jack smiled, but it was weak. I changed tack. "So who's the best singer on the *Pearl*, then?"

Jack looked surprised, and then hung his head in a chuckle. "Marty."

"Marty?" I repeated. "Marty the dwarf?"

Jack nodded, lips flickering around golden teeth. "Aye, like 'em *uproar* singers, 'cept he prefers the term 'short statured'."

I drew a hand up to brush the damp from his cheek, but I still dripped and served only to wet him further. I pulled back quickly, and he wiped his face with a trembling sleeve.

"Christ," he swore. "Don't mind me. I just be wetting the water. The ocean's gotta grow, but the

world, Jamie, she just keeps on shrinking. Smaller and smaller and smaller. Ev'ry now and again she stretches out beautiful and you would think she could never end, but then she curls up and shrinks and leaves none behind for us mortals tha' tried to grow with her."

"She hurt you."

"S'not her fault. She gave so much she couldn' take it all away with 'er." Jack huffed a laugh, and it hurts. He waved his hand dismissively. "I could never be as fair a mistress as freedom is. You dint have to come back."

I gripped the jetty with both hands. "Jack," I said, and my voice cracked. "My heart. Is yours."

I was ready to let go and sink with my heart and soul when Jack grabbed me by both wrists. He stared at me, into me, and it was more intimate than anything we had before shared. More so than his lips on mine, his cock proud for me, and the way his belly had shifted under mine when he laughed. I was struck by the truth in those eyes, my little liar, my pirate stripped bare for me, so beautiful.

"I thought you wouldn't care," I murmured. "You never seemed to before."

Jack cleared his throat. "No' in the way you deserved, aye, but that was before I saw you as you are."

I thought about the way my dark hair dripped ragged, the way my clothes were torn and entwined with seaweed. My boots sagged in the water, the expensive leather ruined. I raised a sardonic eyebrow. "If you're only here for my curious body..."

"No!" Jack looked ready to jump into the water with me, his fingers clenched tight around my wrists. "But I daresay if I looked at a siren again it'd look like Elizabeth no more."

I sighed, my lips twitching upwards. I might as well embrace happiness before that part of me died. Heaving myself onto the jetty, I lost control and began to shiver into the night air. Jack shifted beside me.

His warm coat rested unbidden on my shoulders, and I held him as he leaned into me.

"The mermaid said she could save your heart – could she?"

I wondered if he knew. Perhaps Sappho told him of our curse. Perhaps he knew naught but what he observed.

"No," I answered, still bitter at being so readily duped.

His hand trailed over the back of mine, and my breathing stuttered. "Yeh said... Jamie. If I have your 'eart, can I save it?"

"No, Jack." Turning my palm skywards, I grasped his wandering hand, entwining our fingers together. He squeezed us close, thumb softly caressing.

"Will you die?" he asked.

Only when you do, I thought, but did not answer.

The *Pearl* greeted us not an hour later, her sails shimmering and decks tender underfoot. The few crew awake expressed surprise at my reappearance, waterlogged and wrapped in the Captain's

coat. Jack answered for me, proudly slapping his hand on my back.

“Roped himself a couple o’ sea turtles! Good lad.” He beamed. I felt him pull something from behind my ear – seaweed, probably.

“Aye, sea turtles!” repeated a couple sagely, with no irony.

The rest accepted his explanation with nary a blink, and set to work under Jack’s command. To me he gave no orders, so for a while I watched him as we sailed, with him sometimes watching back.

Eventually my spine grew stiff from the cold, and I wandered into the bowels of the ship, to where the mermaid had been stowed. Apart from the wind’s steady whistle and the restless crashing of the sea, there was silence from within.

I opened the door with trepidation.

Gibbs slouched on a stool, his head lolling back against the wall and *Paradise Lost* sprawled across his knee, *A Sentimental Journey* by his shoes. A single snore burst out.

I addressed Sappho. “I see you’ve been an entertaining companion.”

Brown eyes opened slowly. I wondered if she had been asleep as well, or merely attempted to appear as such. “You’re quite the jokester, you know.”

“I try, but people are wont to take me seriously. I have long placed blame in my eyebrows.”

Sappho’s lips curled into a smile. “Nothing brooks hilarity quite like the gallows... and leaving me here.”

Ah. “So Gibbs told you about me?”

“He is suspicious of you.”

Before I could coax more than serpentine truths from her, a cry rang out above, “In the water!”

More shouts followed. The mermaid stilled.

“Fool!” she hissed. “They followed you here! They’ll claw holes into this vessel and eat us all.”

So the rebel mermen had found us. And it was my fault.

I squared my shoulders. “Then I shall lead them from here.”

I raced outside, expecting an attack. Instead, while peering over the edge I noticed but one lone shape in the dark waters. Jack stood beside me, making annoyed shooing motions with his hands. He grumbled under his breath, and I guessed some of the previous shouts had been from him. I bit down a grin. There was nothing quite like a Sparrow ignored.

When the merman spied me, he hissed. “Giva our sister.” He spoke with broken English; unfortunately, the language of the deep only operated below surface. His education must have been lacking, since Sappho spoke so well, or perhaps he was simply a poor student.

The crew began to jeer, and a few stray pistols fired into the water. The merman ducked easily, the shots wide. That he did not use his song intrigued me. Perhaps he had heard whispers of my own, of the destruction it wrought.

“Are you alone?” I shouted over the din. The crew quietened as I begun, and my last words rang unnaturally loud.

“Others will come. Will sink ship – test us not. Giva sister.”

“Are those the queen’s orders?”

The merman smiled, his teeth bloody. “Queen dead. Like you will be.”

So far, Sappho appeared to be telling the truth. Jack leaned over the rail beside me. “And what o’ her replacement? Whass she doing?”

“Death to mermaids!”

“Too easy,” I muttered to myself, rolling my eyes.

A sudden smell of sweat and rum hit me between the eyes and left with an exit wound out the back of my head. Beside us, Gibbs appeared with a longbow, not a trace of sleep on him.

“Awaitin’ yer orders, Cap’n!”

Jack looked as bewildered as I felt, his gaze comically taking in the sheer size of the contraption. It stretched from deck to my nose, and with its primitive engineering, it looked like it should be resting with Henry VIII’s sunken *Mary Rose*.

Jack clapped his hands. “Good man!”

“Aye sir!” said he, with a smile wide on his ruddy face.

“Fire at will.”

Gibbs missed thrice, the arrows slicing into the sea but not into the agile creature. The crew heckled and the ship rocked. The air quietened, however, when the merman did not reappear immediately. Until there, above the steady crash and roll of the waves, a scratching sound revibrated from below. The *Pearl* groaned as her belly was slashed, hacked into by wicked claws.

Beside me, Jack made as if to jump overboard. “Stop pokin’ holes in my ship!” he bellowed.

The merman did not stop, his claws continuing to score the hull. With a curse, Jack sent a couple down below, with orders to deal with any leaks.

Taking in the wide, apprehensive faces of Jack’s crew, I felt suddenly protective. I refused to sink – not this time.

I leaned over the side and roared. “Cease! I shall bring her out!” When the scrabbling continued, my face grew hot and I let slip some enchantment into my voice, allowing it to carry far and terrible. “Do not make me sing!”

Silence. Then, a wary body flopped to the surface.

Gibbs was ready – a fourth arrow ripped into the tip of a golden tail, stilling the beast and allowing a fifth to breach the creature’s heart.

The merman shuddered, bobbing to the surface before a wave swallowed him. Sea foam bubbled pink, and the crew let out a hurrah. I heard Gibbs’ back get slapped a dozen or more times, a bubble of chatter and praise buoying the man up.

I stared at the spot of moonlit sea that had consumed the merman. Like most of us, barring disease or natural predators, merfolk lived indefinitely. And yet for him, not a trace remained. His only legacy a monster painted anew over a half-drunk bottle of rum. Gone into the ether.

I turned around and gave Gibbs a curt nod. He drew himself proudly to attention, a steady contrast to the bashful look on his face. "Neatly done, Mr. Gibbs."

Before we arrived in her room, Jack had stolen a kiss in a corridor, fast and desperate. His taste lingered even now, a welcome anchor, and for that I was grateful, since I could hardly hold his hand in the presence of Gibbs.

Gibbs stood there now, a rum-soaked barrier between Sappho and Jack, eyeing the mermaid warily while cotton bulged from his ears.

Sappho breathed, her eyes closing to concentrate on the merman's lost soul. I watched, curious, Jack swaying gently at my side. "That was Costas – fast of fin and sharp to track, he would be the scout. He's got... he *had* a jellyfish for a brain, though. This vessel is fast, is it not?"

"Fastest ship in the waters," confirmed Jack.

Sappho nodded. "My guess is we have until midday tomorrow at most before the rest of his party realise his fate and catch us up. They might not be as fast, but they know the tricks of these waters better than any mortal..."

She glanced at me, her eyes pinched. "I fear they seek to prevent me from reaching the coven. If I warn them before my brothers can mount a suitable force, the war would be in the coven's favour. I cannot fail in my task, James."

With exhaustion tugging at our bones, we constructed a plan.

Pavlopetri

Chapter by [not my shell \(Attic Nights\)](#)

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a mention to Pavlopetri, which is an actual sunken city, off the coast of southern Laconia in the Peloponnese. At 5000 years old, it's the oldest of its kind, (re)discovered in 1967, and is a UNESCO heritage protected site. Take a gander [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

And we're at the end! Thanks for reading, folks!

Jack held me close that night. Anamaria stood at the helm, driving the *Pearl* with ruthless grace through choppy seas. Gibb roared orders to Jack's crew – a firm voice mingled with the wind, eddying back and forth, sometimes soft and other times seeming to beat down our bedroom door.

Jack tried to initiate sex – well, we both did. We got as far as sloppy kisses and the occasional misplaced elbow; I was exhausted and he was drunk, and I was so comforted by how nice he felt in my arms. Like homecoming, I thought. The night air was cool and he was so very warm.

"I do not wish to alarm you," I whispered to his slumbering form. "But you are it for me. This... is it."

My heart had given itself to a mortal man embroiled in a love affair with lies and kohl. I sighed, my lips twitching upwards. "Though it's heavy and burdens me to think you might not feel the same, I am glad to finally have somebody worth loving." I kissed his shoulder. "I do love you so, Jack."

Jack gave no answer. I stroked his scarred back and he vaguely cuddled me closer, breathing out with a strange snuffling sort of noise. His lips brushed my chest and my eyes closed. With my fingers, I counted his scars like sheep and joined him there, in the deep.

Jack and I rose with the sun. We stared out across the briny blue with fingers scarcely touching, and dared not to smile. Under the bleeding colours of sunrise the crew gathered, Sappho held aloft in her bath by blackened, calloused hands like a queen on her litter.

We stood poised near the edge. Below us, the glittering sea draped over the horizon like a blanket of starlight. I drew the mermaid from her bath, and made to throw her overboard, as we had discussed. Jack cleared his throat, and I looked at him askance.

"We had a bargain. What treasure do you grant us?"

The pirates murmured and gathered close.

Sappho drew her head aloft, speaking to them all. "Our treasure is information. What you seek... can only be sought by those who seek it not." She turned to me, half of her face in light. "*You*, green-eyes. He must take but only one handful. I believe that's all you will require. I hope we meet

again.” She smiled at me with her teeth almost soft, and her eyes crinkling.

“I’ll look you up when you’re queen of the Mediterranean.”

She smacked my arm. Four faint lines of blood beaded from where her claws had grazed me.

This was the part I was apprehensive about. I glanced back to Jack, wishing to feel those worried lips against mine. He returned my look, for once not the instigator of devastation, and nodded once. I swallowed. Leaning over the rail, I feigned imbalance, and tumbled into the water with Sappho still in my arms.

I could hear muffled voices above us as I shifted, disliking the way the mermaid inspected my transformation. Once I was in seal form, she blinked, inclining her head in a gesture that I mirrored. I watched her swim swiftly northeast, a direct course for the coven, while I myself bore north, as if to make for mainland Greece. I did intend to make it to land, the blood on my arm a beacon for the mermen, as they would be limited in their options to follow on soil.

I looked back, both disappointed and relieved that I could no longer see the *Pearl*. The island of Cythera crept on my left, distant but present, and I ignored her. Greece herself drew closer with every desperate mile. About three miles from the coast, I was surprised to find myself in the heart of a sunken city.

Blue-tinted streetscapes and building foundations rose plain from the seabed, their gardens not of olive or pomegranate trees, but lush with Neptune weed and thick with moss. Flurries of fish darted around a towering marble goddess, an infant cradled in her arms. I ducked behind her robes, the vibrations in the water that tugged at my whiskers confused. There were too many fish, too much life, but for a moment I thought I felt something larger. Perhaps it was a merman, but I feared it could be a shortfin mako, a shark of apparently legendary speed. If it was the latter, I would best wait until it passed, its stomach sated with something smaller. If it was the merman...

My whiskers vibrated as a spear trembled through the water. I spun, trying to avoid it, but it was too late. True and sharp, its head pierced my hind flippers. A small wound. Already I felt the flesh knit itself back together; healing was thankfully quick in this form.

I bared my teeth at the merman, whose caramel skin blazed hot and dangerous. He extended a claw to me. Desperately, I worked to dislodge the spear from my lower half, my healing pelt clinging to the foreign object.

He spoke clearly and with venom. “You know how they treated us? They didn’t even need us; there hasn’t been a child in fifty years. We were *pets*. Slaves. You knew, and you did nothing.”

Managing to dislodge the spear, I scooted backwards, my blood curling out into the currents. With a sigh, the merman sung out to his brethren, calling them to him.

I bought myself for time while I healed; in my current state I could not hope to outpace him.

I spoke as if bored. “And yet you did murder them all – a bit excessive, if I might be so bold.”

As expected, he eagerly defended himself, a hooked claw jabbing the water for emphasis. “They experienced not our problems and so dismissed our cries. Do you know how it feels to be irrelevant?”

“Can’t say that I do,” I said dryly, spotting his brothers bearing towards us alarmingly fast. I was not entirely unsympathetic to their plight, but death was imminent; I was hardly going to spend my last moments buttering up my murderer.

Quickly, and feeling my flippers healed enough, I raced away, only to be caught by a sharp hand. Expected, but worth the try.

The first merman grinned at me, unhooking his claws from my recently healed tail.

“Good,” he said. “My brothers are all here.”

I stared at the few as they surrounded me. “You mean to tell me you are *it*? Surely that’s not all of you.” I could not keep the incredulity from my voice. “You plan to wage war on the main coven with half a dozen?”

They exchanged looks. “We have dozens more; we’re...”

I rolled my eyes. “Just the ones sent on this pathetic little errand, yes?”

“We had to stop you from warning the main coven,” hissed the largest one, his pretty features thunderous.

“I’m not going to warn the main coven.”

As they read the truth in my words, realisation blossomed warm over their sharp faces.

“Incompetent, very incompetent,” I drawled. “You do realise Sappho’s slipped under your very noses.”

A spear swung towards me in warning. “Then you’ll tell us where she went!”

“Are you really going to blather about, or are you going to stop her? Track her... honestly.” I blinked slowly, condescending.

The mermen cast narrow looks between them. The large, pretty one smirked. “Perhaps we kill you; your flesh looks quite sustaining.”

The others nodded, and I backed away slowly. The mainland was still a mile away, but if I could get enough of a head start...

“I shouldn’t recommend wasting such time, if you actually wish to stop her,” I waved a flipper dismissively, my voice level. “She’s a fast one. I warrant she’s faster than all –”

Without warning, I darted between my hunters, and hared down a spiralled mosaic seabed, its ancient black and white glass chanting me on. Darting around clouds of sluggish fish, I took the chance to surface, to breathe a deep lungful of air. I did so, exhaling again before I skimmed along the surface, diving under only to almost collide into an ornate column. I glanced behind me, frustrated.

The mermen swam closer, closer than I had hoped, with their teeth bared and claws at full extension. A shadow passed over us, but I ignored it in lieu of darting around a stone lion, avoiding the smallest merman as he dashed towards me. His claws tore a chunk of algae from the lion’s mane, scratching from it an ear-splitting sound. Another appeared before me, his long hair an inky bloom, and he managed to slash at my back before I twisted, grabbing their wrist in my jaws. We struggled, but it was useless; there were too many for me.

I let go of the longhaired one’s wrist reluctantly, and drew myself up ready to sing – consequences be damned.

Suddenly, a sword thrust underwater, held by a familiar beringed hand, and I nearly groaned. The first merman rushed to grab Jack's hand; I barrelled him out of the way, his slight form no match for mine. Sharp claws raked down my side, ripping through me like a knife to parchment.

I writhed in pain, and out of the corner of my eye, the others flitted to me, their teeth gleaming. The water spilled pink in our scuffle, their eyes darkening with hunger.

A sudden taint of petroleum in the water was all the warning I had before flames erupted above us.

The mermen startled. Golden, hot hues danced about the ocean's surface, a bursting nebula of light. I clamped my jaws down on a fragile dorsal fin, and its owner screeched. My attackers fell back, spooked, their eyes wide and their postures defensive. The flames licked on.

Clearly deciding to waste no more time, the mermen darted away, turning their heads back occasionally, as if they regretted not eating me. I clenched my jaw, and surfaced as soon as the fire extinguished. I stared at Jack, who peered at me joyfully from a small dinghy.

"I'm hoping that's you, Norrington, and not some other flippered thing."

That stupid pirate! I barked at him, cross. As if I could not have handled this, swanning in as if I was some fool that needed rescue...

"I'm 'ardly gonna let the love of me life go alone," he said, but I ignored him.

I sloshed about, hotly. Setting fire to water – what a bloody show-off. I paused to glare at him.

"Don't look at me like that with them big blubbering eyes. Of course I love you, ya daft bugger."

I didn't even— oh!

The realisation of his proclamation warmed me to my flippers. I yipped twice, and spiralled in the water, spraying Jack with my efforts. At his shout of surprise, followed closely by laughter, I went to the vessel's edge and attempted to board.

Jack assisted me, grabbing me with strong hands as I propelled myself upwards. My belly caught the side, and I tipped in, nearly capsizing the boat with our efforts.

"Gosh. Erm, you're..." He waggled his hands, gold rings shimmering. "...fat."

I stared at him, incredulous.

He winced and changed tack. "Still got those eyes. Lovely eyes, they are. Best eyes o' the Caribbees."

I rolled them.

"Oi!" He looked about me curiously. I craned my neck, trying to see what the matter was.

"Where's your flip flap?"

Oh, honestly! I shook my coat, spraying him with sea. He spluttered, but the smile never left his face. Under the hot sun, I dried quickly, and as the last of my wounds healed shut, I transformed. Gasping, I rose onto two legs.

Jack stared at me, a pained expression on his face. He shook himself, wiggling one leg out as if he were a cat that stepped into a puddle. Shaking himself, he grabbed my hand and kissed my wrist.

I smiled, the sensation of homecoming granting me strength. I kissed him.

Against my bared skin his salt-worn clothes were warm, baked hot by the Mediterranean sun. His arms looped around the breadth of my shoulders, reeling us closer. As we moved together, I could not help but notice his hipbones sharp and solid under my thumbs. His mouth soft, open and sweet. A dichotomy of being, a harmony of soul. Stamping down a rising tendril of arousal, I hugged him close and breathed my impossible monster in.

A thought crossed me, and I pulled back to ask, “How *did* you get here so fast?”

He cocked his head. “Strapped meself a couple of sea turtles, love.”

His dark eyes were twinkling though, and I shook my head, amused. I noticed, however, how red and sore his hands appeared, swollen as if he had rowed quickly and persistently. He did not seem bothered by them, however, and drew out his compass. Reluctantly, I dragged my eyes from my lover.

The *Pearl* waved at us from the horizon.

I looked up to the sky. The sun beat down on us, hot and sticky, so I swiped his hat from his head. He scrabbled briefly for it; but, after holding it aloft with a quirked eyebrow, he gave up.

I laid down my pelt and flopped onto the dinghy floor, the hard wood the softest down to my exhausted body. I hooked my legs upon a bench and used Jack’s tricorn to shade my face from the sun. I felt elated.

“What’s the devil with all that map business, anyway?” I drawled, waving a hand vaguely in the air. Though I could not see it through the hat, I felt its cool shadow drag across my chest.

“Tangou,” I continued. “That washerwoman, even Sappho seemed in on it. I wouldn’t be surprised if Mister Cotton’s parrot had something about it engraved into his beak. Is it stolen goods? By gods, I do hope I don’t have a *pirate’s* treasure map tattooed to me. That would be ironic.”

“You’re not drunk, are you?”

I lifted the tricorn from my face and scowled. Jack smiled down at me, and I laughed. “No.”

“You really wanna know?”

I shrugged. I didn’t care much, one way or another. I was curious, but felt only the type of curiosity that pricked at one after a stocking went missing from its pair. But Jack was offering truth, and I did so want to get him into its habit. “I suppose.”

“It be a map to the fountain of youth.”

Jack said it so casually that I had time to stand before the words even sounded like English.

“The Fountain of Youth?” I asked dumbly.

“Aye.” He squinted off into the distance and swayed on his feet. I steadied him.

“The Fountain of Youth that makes one forever young?”

“Aye.” He looked down at his compass. He shook it, then dragged my slack face down into a kiss. Pulling back before I could return it properly, he shook the compass again. A half-hearted scowl crossed his face and he swung it aloft, away from me.

“The Fountain of Youth that will make you immortal? Not die?”

The bean nighe’s words whispered back to me. *Youth as eternal as ye heart.*

Jack paused, looking up from his compass. “Ah. Jamie love—”

“Oh *Jack*,” I said, my face breaking into a smile. “You terrible monster!”

Jack grinned up at me crookedly. “Aye, but I’m your monster.”

I drew my pirate against my chest and kissed his hair. Breathing, I pulled back and attempted to school my features.

“Well Jack,” I said wryly, a smirk still lingering on my lips. “I do believe it’s high time we went on an adventure.”

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